

# **MINORITY STUDENTS AND SPECIAL EDUCATION**

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By Mercy Addo.

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University of Saskatchewan

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan

S7N 0W0

OR

Dean

College of Graduate Studies and Research

University of Saskatchewan

107 Administration Place

Saskatoon, Saskatchewan S7N 5A2

Canada

## **ABSTRACT**

The purpose of this study was to investigate the perception of overrepresentation of minority students in special education in Canada among community members, parents and educators. A qualitative research approach was employed in the study. The study used interviewing as the data collection method. Eight participants were interviewed to find out about their perceptions regarding what factors contributed to the over representation of minority students into special education. Participants perceived that socioeconomic status (SES), cultural differences, teacher characteristics, language, high transiency, assessment, impact of history and gender differences were factors in the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. An analysis of the data revealed that the issue of over representation is multifaceted, complex and interrelated. In light of the above, the study identified that there is a need for transformation in the current school system to accommodate changing demographics in order to make education more equitable for minority students. Most participants believed that there is a need for inclusion of minority cultural knowledge in the curriculum and assessment process. The participants recommended greater involvement of parents and community in educating students. Implications arising from this study pinpoint the need for a holistic approach to the issues of overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Lastly the study concluded that misplacement can have negative effects for both students and tax payers and, as such, steps need to be put in place to address this situation.

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## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

A Statistics Canada (2006) report revealed that about 202,350 children from elementary to high school require some form of special education services. Although this number might not seem like a large percentage: it is quite significant in terms of resource allocation. According to Olson (1991) “specialists assume that approximately the same proportion of very bright individuals, cognitively limited individuals, language handicapped individuals, etc., will be found in any population” (p.1). However, this is not the case in most special education programs in our schools. Minority students are 2.3 times more likely to be identified as requiring special education services compared to Caucasian students. A study by Losen (2002) revealed that in 1998, there were approximately 1.5 million minority students placed in special education programs in the United States, with majority of these students being either African Americans or Native Americans even though these ethnic groups form a minority population in the school system.

Similarly in Canada, a report published by the Ministry of Education - British Columbia Aboriginal Education Branch and Special Programs Branch (2001) revealed there is a disproportionately representation of Aboriginal students in all special education categories with the exception of the gifted category. The report further indicated that the over-representation of Aboriginal students in special education was at its highest in the none organic classification category like the area of behaviour disorders where the reported incidence for Aboriginal students in British Columbia is approximately 3.5 times than that of the general student population. Macleans.ca on campus magazine (2009) also stated that there is an “alarming number” of black students placed in special programs in Nova Scotia.

The question then is what makes some particular groups more likely to be predisposed to special education? Oswald, Coutinho, Best and Singh (1999) defined overrepresentation as “the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed in a specific disability category” (p. 198). Students who are placed in special education are believed to have biological or other conditions which make them unable to perform to the expectations of the regular curriculum. As a result, there seems to be lower expectations of such students (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Consequently, a student who is inappropriately placed in special education is trained to underachieve (Conahan, Burggraf, Nelson, Bailey & Ford, 2003). Hence, if steps are not taken to properly regulate how referrals are made, there will be serious



consequences. For example, scarce resources which could also be used to benefit students who really need special education services would be wasted.

Furthermore, Conahan, et al. (2003) observed that “unfortunately, the remediation never quite gets the student out of the category of special education student” (para. 24). This situation is partly because the student might not suffer from a real cognitive processing problem, and as such, the placement will not be able to solve the problem if the issue is just due to cultural differences between the child and the school (Conahan, et al.). Moreover, research suggests that labelling also lead to stigmatization, segregation and low self-esteem (Osterholm, Nash, & Kritsonis 2007; Rosenthal, 2002). The misplacement often predisposes students to other risk factors like learned helplessness, low academic performance, disruptive behaviour, and eventually dropping out of school, which reinforces the designation. Therefore this research seeks to determine what factors predisposes minority students to special education services and ways to address the overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

### **Problem Statement**

Several studies have revealed that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2007; de Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). Again, my anecdotal observations also seem to suggest a disproportionate high number of minority students in special education. However, almost all the research documented carried out on the overrepresentation of minority students in special education are from the United States, with very little research carried out on the subject in Canada therefore I decided to carry out an exploratory study in Canada to find out if a similar pattern exists in this country considering that Canada is a multicultural society with large influx of immigration.

Reports based on Statistics Canada Survey (2006) show there is an increasing cultural diversity in Canada. Over 90,000 foreign workers move to Canada to work temporarily each year. In addition to this population, another 130,000 foreign students come to study in Canada annually (Citizenship and Immigration Canada, 2007). The same survey conducted by Statistics Canada, Census of Canada, 2001 revealed that over 40% of the population within the school-going age reported or identified themselves as belonging to two or more cultures other than French or British. Statistics Canada also revealed Aboriginal population has the highest birth rate and makes up the fastest growing population in Saskatchewan.

This phenomenon of increasing diversity calls for appropriate reform to reflect and accommodate this change (Statistics Canada, 2006). Thus the need to address issues surrounding educating minority students is vital for the success of the whole country. Moreover, there have been concerns about the effectiveness of special education, costs and potential stigmatization associated with being in special education (Horn & Tynan, 2001; Cook & Schirmer, 2003). Hence there is the need to reduce the over placement of minority students into special and include them in the normal classroom. Such concerns and questions provided some of the underlying motivation for this study.

### **Purpose of the study**

The purpose of the study was to investigate the perceptions of teachers, community leaders and parents regarding overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Specifically, the study sought to investigate what factors they believe accounted for the overrepresentation and what measures can be put in place to reduce this occurrence.

### **General Research Question**

The main question concerns If, how, and to what extent do teachers, community leaders and parents perceive that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education in Canada and what factors might account for this situation?

Research shows there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs (Losen, 2002; Conahan, et al., 2003; Cross, 2002). Numerous studies in the United States of America reveal that there is an over representation of minority students in special education (Patton, 1998; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz & Chung, 2005; Losen & Orfield, 2002 ; Hosp & Hosp ,2004; Harry, Klingner, Sturges & Moore, 2002). This trend has caused much concern and significant research has been conducted to find solutions to this problem.

However, as noted few studies have been conducted on this topic in Canada. Hence, the purpose of this study is to investigate and gain insight into whether overrepresentation of minority students in special education classes might exist here in Canada by examining the schooling context in a mid-western city. Furthermore, this study aims at determining the factors that might contribute to this scenario.

### **Specific research question**

Studies have suggested that factors such as financial status, cultural differences and race contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Hosp & Hosp, 2004). To address my general research question, I proceeded with the following five questions with regard to the perceptions of selected teachers, community leaders and parents:

1. What factors contribute to or influence the referral of minority students into special education?
  - i. Does a child's economic status play a role in the referral of students for special education?
2. How do teachers' perceptions, attitudes, expectations and behaviour influence minority students placed in special education?
3. How do differences in culture contribute to minority students' placement in special education?
4. How does gender influence the referral of students for special education services in schools?
5. What measures, if any, might be used or put in place to prevent the over representation of minority students in special education?

### **Significance of Research**

1. The study will serve as an explorative study for future research in the area of minority students in special education.
2. The study will help provide insight into issues facing minority students in special education as well as offer recommendations to address the problem.
3. This study also hopes to provide suggestions on how to better meet the needs of minority students and improve their chances of succeeding in the current school system.

### **Operational Definition of Terms**

According to Haveman (2009), international human rights law differentiates between 'Indigenous People' or Aboriginal People" and 'minorities'. Here in Canada for example, the Employment Equity Act defines "members of visible minorities" as persons, other than Aboriginal peoples, who are non-Caucasian in race or non-white in colour. The Act also identifies "Aboriginal People" as persons who are Indians, Inuit or Métis" (p.1). However, for

the purposes of this study, the concept ‘minorities’ is used to include both visible minorities, language minorities and Aboriginals/Indigenous people’. I acknowledge there are significant differences between the groups; nevertheless, they do seem to share some similar struggles and challenges (such as high poverty rates, cultural identity, racism etc) in their daily experience in relation to how they are treated in mainstream society. Mainstream society refers to the dominant culture, norms and values in a particular society.

For the purposes of this paper the key terms are defined as follows:

1. Minority students refers to “students whose home language and culture differ from those of the school and wider society such as language minority students and students whose home language is a version of English but whose cultural background is significantly different from those of the school and wider society”. For example, African Americans, Hispanics, First Nations and Inuit (Cummins, 1986, p. 19).
2. Culturally Responsive Teaching is defined as “using cultural reference and knowledge, prior experiences and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective for them. It teaches to and through the strengths of these students” (Gay, 2000, p.29).
3. Special education is defined as “programming and/or services designed to accommodate students within the public school system whose educational needs require interventions different from, or in addition to, those which are needed by most students” (Hutchinson, 2007, p.3).
4. Overrepresentation is defined as overrepresentation as “the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed” in special education (Oswald, Coutinho, Best & Singh, 1999. p. 198).

### **Limitations of the study**

The study involved only eight participants and therefore the results of this study cannot be generalized. The study is limited to the opinion of the participants and may not generalize to a wider population. Thus the results of this study are only indicative or suggestive but not entirely indicative of larger contexts, for example, provincial or national levels.

Additionally, majority of the participants were of minority heritage.

### **Delimitation**

This study is explorative in nature offering insight into the Canada context by examining a local context. The intent was not to produce a conclusive and extensive determination of the state of special education in relation to minority representation but to gain insight by examining a specific location as an indicator of the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Additionally, the study will serve as an explorative study for future research in the area of minority students in special education.

Equally important, a qualitative approach will allow for the exploration of solutions to complex issues which might emerge in the investigation process and as a result produce a more detailed picture of the phenomenon (Yin, 2003). Again, a small sample size offers the opportunity to engage in a more detailed investigation of the subject (Yin, 2003; Miles & Huberman, 1994), which is very important considering the fact that very few studies of this nature have been carried out in Canada.

### **Assumptions underlying the study.**

In conducting this study, I assumed that:

1. There was sufficient and practical level of trust and mutual respect existing in relationships between myself, as the researcher, and participants for the honest sharing of information.
2. Participants have enough experience with the phenomenon.
3. Participants shared their experiences with me freely.

### **Research Positioning**

In qualitative research researchers offer interpretations that emerge from their experience and engagement with the evidence available, given this it is important that I reveal my background because my background affects my decision about what data are to be collected and how data are reported, conceptualized and interpreted (Creswell, 2009; McMillan & Wergin, 2002). According to Creswell, self-introspection is a critical part in understanding one's self or thoughts during the research process. Even though I do not intend to make my background, my past experiences, or my values the focus of this study, these influence how data is interpreted. Thus it is essential as a researcher, to identify and situate myself in the research (Lincoln, 1995). Self-awareness is also an important process because it helps the researcher identify biases that affect analysis and interpretation of the data and so offer a more enriching interpretation.

Additionally, self-disclosure also gives the reader a better understanding of the background knowledge and depth of understanding that the researcher brings to the research and provides a sense of trustworthiness in regards to the research. How we interpret the world is based on who we are, therefore, it is undeniable that a part of who I am will be reflected in the ideas that I see, interpret and bring forward within this research. Researchers are often believed to engage in objective research based solely on facts, figures and reflect some “absolute” truth. However, that is not reality. Truth and reality are relative while objectivity involves making selection as to what is important to include and what to dismiss at any point in time during the research process (Bowler & Morus, 2005, pp. 11-16). This belief resonates with an old adage in my culture that says “a stranger has big eyes but cannot see.” Simply put, it is not that the stranger cannot see physically or observe and note evidence but that they cannot understand or interpret well what is happening within the context of the local people. I believe there is no one who is purely neutral (Wing, 2003; Lacey, 1999). To me, being objective does not mean being neutral rather it means knowing your stand and still being open to listen to the contrary view as wisdom and reality too, and trying to have a balance or middle ground (Eisner, 1992).

My position in relation to the research question, about overrepresentation of minority students in special education, is shaped by my personal experiences, my values of finding a balance in every situation, my identity as a visible minority person and my academic life. I value education. I believe like others such as (Freire, 1970; Giroux, 2001) education can be one of the equal playing fields in a capitalist society. Given this, I believe that discussing the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education is important for helping to create an opportunity to help develop policies and find ways to help minority students succeed in schools. Addressing this also mean providing a better understanding of the issues facing minority students and finding ways to alleviate such issues. Further, there is a need to give minority people a voice from the perspective of parents, community elders and professionals for they are likely to have meaningful answers to the challenges facing students and their families.

An additional fundamental value I have is the belief that all people, irrespective of ethnicity innately have the same cognitive abilities; no ethnicity is more prone to any disabilities and is the basis for my concern for why there should be a disproportionate number of minority students requiring special education. In addition to my personal interest pertaining to minority education, professionally I am interested in how to better help minority students succeed in

school and be a better advocate for them. Again I have had the opportunity to work with students in special education and through my job I realized that most of the students in special education are minority students. Similarly, other family and acquaintances have also expressed similar experiences and complained about their kids being misplaced in special education. Without enough published research, there are few opportunities to have a discussion about such concerns and get policy in place to reduce this issue (Vizina, 2010). It was within these contexts I decided to do an exploratory study to find out if indeed the same pattern as in the United States is happening and to make recommendations to help improve the situation.

Furthermore, on an academic level, the focus of this study is to help bridge the education gap between minority students and their white counterparts and to better understand and support minority students in the regular classroom. Again data suggests that special education students have low income jobs and less post-secondary education (Chamberlain, 2005; Dei, 2003). Pursuing and obtaining an education often serves as upward mobility for minority students raises the question if special education is the answer to all language minority students. I first came across the term overrepresentation of minority students in one of my readings (Losen, 2002) and it resonated within me and I became interested to find out more.

Moreover, in one of my undergraduate special education class, a professor told a story of a young black student who was smart and his teacher thought he should be in the advanced program but met resistance from the school principal because of his color. I thought to myself if you have a smart student who is in the regular classroom he may get bored and get into problems but then because of his color it would be defined differently and this smart boy's future will be altered just because of a misunderstanding or misplacement. With that said, I am not saying that this is the case for every minority student but that did get me motivated to help raise awareness about issues of misidentification and misplacement. As I read more, I was convinced this topic was worth pursuing it. I also realized there is not enough research done in this area in Canada. I could only find two researches related to this topic here in Canada. All the studies were carried out in United States so I wanted to start up the conversation and do an exploratory study. I wanted to find out if a similar pattern existed here in Canada. What is more, I believe special education is useful for the right people but should be the last resort.

Again, as I went through school I realized how teacher characteristics made a difference in whether I participated in class or not. I was also made aware of cultural difference. In my own

educational life, I recalled one teacher honestly making a remark about my hair in class genuinely in an effort to show that she is knowledgeable about African culture but her comment was very inappropriate and offending. All the above experiences and concerns led me to want to investigate ways to support minority students. Thus this study is an inquiry into the disproportionate number of minority students in special education and to gain a better insight into the issue and how to support minority students.

### **Organization of the study**

Chapter one of the study describes the purpose of the study, the significance of the study, the research questions, the definitions of terms, delimitations, limitations and the assumptions.

Chapter Two contains a review of the relevant literature and divided into three sections. The first section provides a background and overview of the problem; understanding the issue of disproportionate representation of racial and minority students in special education programs. The second section discusses the risk factors associated with overrepresentation: Lower socioeconomic level, Gender, Culture Differences, Disparities in Discipline, teacher characteristics, Assessment, Identity Issues and last section describes the conceptual framework of the study.

Chapter Three, covers the philosophical orientation of the study, the research design, research methods, research analysis, issues of trustworthiness, and ethical issues.

In chapter Four, I provide a description of the context of the participants and the interview data, and restated the research questions, examining the emergent themes in the light of the relevant literature, measures to reduce the overrepresentation and summary.

Chapter five offers the study implications for policy, practice, and further research, and concluding remarks.



## **CHAPTER 2: LITERATURE REVIEW**

This chapter provide a review of literature in relation to minority students in special education. To better substantiate the necessity of this research there is a need to clearly understand the issue of overrepresentation of minority students in special education programs. The following discussion addresses this phenomenon.

### **Disproportionate Representation of Minority Students in Special Education Programs.**

Several Studies conducted in the United States of America have revealed that there is a disproportionate number of racial and ethnic minority students referred for special education services (Hosp & Reschly, 2004; Cross & Donovan, 2002; Arnold & Lassmann, 2003). According to a National Research Council (2002) report, 5% of Asian/Pacific Islander, 11% Hispanics, 12% Caucasians, 13% Native American, and 14% African American students are identified for special education services. A similar trend is seen here with regard to other minority groups in Canada. A report from the Alberta Disabilities Forum stated that “Within special education and behavioral classrooms in Alberta, there is an overrepresentation of aboriginal children and children from other cultural minorities (those who typically speak English as a second language)” p (11). Dei (2003) also noted that a disproportionate number of Black or African Canadians, First Nations/Aboriginals and Portuguese Canadians students are enrolled in special education and non-university stream programs. Additionally, one of the key findings of a review study of the Black Learners Advisory Committee (BLAC) report revealed there is a high percentage of Nova Scotian students of African descent in special education in Nova Scotia (Lee & Marshall, 2009). The report stated that “There is a pervasive perception and a vigorous claim in African Nova Scotian communities that there is an over-representation of African Nova Scotian students” (Lee & Marshall, 2009, p. 11). The report also revealed that students placed in special education had restricted access to post secondary educational opportunity.

What is even more striking is the fact that certain minority groups are overrepresented in certain disability categories. For example according to statistics from the Office for Civil Rights (OCR) 1998 elementary, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) from 1998-1999 and secondary school civil rights compliance reports and national projections, African American students were 2.64% more likely to be labelled as intellectually challenged while Native

American students are 7.45% more likely to be labelled as having learning disabilities (Donovan & Cross, 2002). Similarly, a report published by the Ministry of Education - British Columbia Aboriginal Education Branch and Special Programs Branch indicated that the disproportionality of Aboriginal students in special education was highest in the area of behaviour disorders where the reported incidence for Aboriginal students in British Columbia is approximately 3.5 times than that of the general student population. Additionally, an exploratory study by Gabel, Curcic, Powell, Khaled and Albee (2009) revealed that the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education is a global phenomenon. Gabel et al., studied special education in four countries; Canada, Germany, New Zealand and the USA and concluded that the overrepresentation of minority students in special education is a primary indicator of inequity in education.

### **Risk Factors**

In order to deal with the issues preventing minority students from achieving, the factors affecting their educational attainment must be recognized. What follows is an explanation of some of the risk factors experienced by minority students. They include: lower socioeconomic level, identity crises, cultural differences, bias in assessment and school environment or context.

#### **Lower socioeconomic level**

Poverty plays a big factor in the overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz & Chung 2005). Minority groups in the United States and Canada are often faced with high levels of poverty due to unemployment and other social factors, which in turn place them in a lower socioeconomic echelon. Data from Statistics Canada consistently indicate that immigrant, Aboriginal people, disabled women, and women of colour make up the highest percentage of people living in poverty in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2000). Again, according Ross, Scott, and Smith (2000), in 1995, 43.4% of Aboriginal people, 35.9% of visible minorities and 30.8% of persons with disabilities lived in poverty. Moreover, Bennett and Blackstock (2007) also noted that Aboriginal peoples are especially disadvantaged with almost everyone in two children living in poverty. Furthermore, data from Statistics Canada revealed that in 1996, 73% of Aboriginal single mother parents lived below the low-income cut-offs. Statistics Canada, 2000 reported that “the average annual income of Aboriginal women is \$13,300, compared to \$18,200 for Aboriginal men, and \$19,350 for non-Aboriginal women” (2000, p. 258). The report goes on further to state that 44% of the

Aboriginal population living off reserves live in poverty, and 47% of people on reserve have an income of less than \$10,000 (Morris & Gonsalves, 2005). Again, using data from Statistics Canada, Morris & Gonsalves reported that visible minority women are among the low income financial bracket in Canada. “The average annual income for a visible minority woman in Canada is \$16,621, almost \$3,000 less than the average for other women (\$19,495) and almost \$7,000 less than that of visible minority men (\$23,635)” (Statistics Canada 2000, p. 232, 246 , Morris & Gonsalves, 2005) . Furthermore according to the same Statistics Canada data, “Education does not reduce the income gap between immigrant women and Canadian-born women. Recent immigrant women between the ages of 25-44 who have a university degree and who worked full-year, full-time earn \$14,000 less than Canadian-born women (Statistics Canada 2000, p. 203 as cited by Morris & Gonsalves, 2005). In light of this observation, MacMillan and Reschly (1998) extrapolated that “ethnicity and poverty are inextricably interwoven in our society” (p. 20).

The issue of poverty acts as a precursor to other risk factors for minority students in the present education system for example, Mart`inez Alem`an (2006) found that is less likely for minority children to participate in early childhood education programs in the United State due to poverty. He found that fewer than half (45.3%) of Latino four year olds are enrolled in preschool education compared to 58% of four years old children of European descent. This lack of a strong educational foundation has a rippling effect by placing minority children farther behind on the education ladder right from the start, which is probably a reflection of the number of minority students in special education (Mart`inez Alem`an, 2006).

Poverty appears to predispose children to other negative risk factors for academic failure. Children from low economic status neighbourhood are more likely to be referred for special education because the schools often lack the necessary resources and skills to deal effectively with the children’s problems in the classroom and hence refer more students for special education services. Again, schools in such areas most likely do not have educational psychologists to carry out effective assessment. Most of these schools lack school counsellors to help good students who might temporally be experiencing problems or need help without being referred for special education services.

In addition, the economic distress associated with poverty may affect the ability of parents to provide the emotional and other developmental needs for children. Families faced with

financial stress often suffer as a result of parents being unavailable to provide a stable and cohesive supportive family due to long working hours. Furthermore, such financial burden often causes strain on family relationship and stability because the parents are stressed and are unable to spend quality time with their children or get involved with what goes on in the school. Consequently, the children do not receive the necessary cognitive stimulation that enhances positive mental and emotional development.

Among other things, poverty is associated with social problems like schools with fewer resources, unqualified teachers and lower academic expectations. These issues help perpetuate the cycle of academic underachievement, high drop-out rates and poverty in the long run. According to Dei (2003) dropout rates in Canada are highest among Black or African Canadians, First Nations/Aboriginals and Portuguese Canadians than the general student population.

### **Gender**

Studies indicate that there are more male students in special education compared to female students (Young, Sabbah, Young, Reiser & Richardson, 2010; Hoffman, Powlishta, & White, 2004; Coutinho & Oswald 2005; Oswald, Coutinho, Best, & Nagle, 2003; Wehmeyer, & Schwartz 2001). A Statistics Canada (2006) report revealed that greater proportion of males aged 0 to 14 (4.6%) were reported as having a disability than females in the same age group (2.7%). Learning disability was found to be the most common disability for boys accounting for 72.7 % in the school age children ( 5-14 years) while chronic health conditions was the most common type for girls at (65%). Again, Conahan, et al. (2003) also observed that male students irrespective of ethnicity make up about 75% of the special education population. Furthermore even controlling for gender, there is disproportionately a higher number of minority males in special education programs. Studies reveal that minority males are more likely to be placed in special education than their Caucasian male counterpart (Coutinho and Oswald, 2005; Donovan and Cross, 2002; Conahan, et al., 2003). However, African American male are especially more likely to receive special education (Holzman, 2006; Noguera, 2005; Davis, 2005; Moore III, Henfield & Owens, 2008). African American males in special education programs are twice the percentage represented in the general school population (Conahan et al, 2003). According to Moore III, Henfield & Owens (2008) “nationally, it is estimated that nearly 20,000 African American male students are inappropriately classified as mentally retarded. This estimation represents a 300% over classification of this student population” (Holzman, 2006, p.

908). The situation was not different in Canada either, data from the British Columbia Aboriginal Education Branch and Special Programs Branch' study revealed that there were more males, and especially Aboriginal male students were placed in special education.

Furthermore minority males are more likely to be referred for high incidence category disability especially emotional disturbance or behavior related disabilities (Donovan & Cross, 2002; Moore III, Henfield & Owens, 2008). African American male are disproportionately identified for Emotional and behavior disorder in the United States (Osher, Woodruff, & Sims, 2002; Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, & Chung, 2005). Similarly in Canada, Aboriginal males are overrepresented in behavior related disorders (McBride & McKee, 2001).

### **Culture differences**

A study by Townsend, (2000) revealed that cultural difference contributes to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs. Cultural differences between the home and school also contribute to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs. The culture at the schools, in most cases, only reflects one culture, which is basically the middle-class Anglo culture. According to Boykin (1994), the cultural underpinning of schools is largely congruent with middle-class, European values which result in schools ignoring or downplay the strengths of diverse students and their families. To this end Harry and Klingner, (2006) concluded

We argue that the process of determining children's eligibility for special education is anything but a science. Rather, it is the result of social forces that intertwine to construct an identity of "disability" for children whom the regular-education system finds too difficult to serve. (p. 9).

Valenzuela (1999) described the culture at the school as *subtractive schooling*. He mentioned the fact that schools often ignore students' knowledge of their native language or worst yet, treated it as a deficit. Freire (1970) noted that an education where a student's culture or language is alienated, the thought-language is also alienated, and the alienated student is not committed to whatever he/she is doing.

In addition, research has revealed that minority students are often adversely affected by the discontinuity between their culture and language at home and the culture that they encounter

at school (Ogbu & Simons, 1994). This situation is especially true for English as Second Language (ESL) students. Thus, the absence of continuity and consistency between the children's home culture and the school can interfere with their competent functioning in the new setting. As a result, English Second Language students are disproportionately referred for special education services.

A recent study by Swanson, Gerber, and Saez, (2006) on short and long term memory, growth in literacy, and cognition in bilingual children at risk or not at risk for reading disabilities revealed that growth in the working memory of the child's primary language predicted growth in the second language reading. Therefore, discontinuation of the primary language of minority students at schools has a direct consequence on their reading abilities.

Furthermore, research by Halonen, Aunola, Ahonen and Nurmi (2006) suggested that reading difficulty promotes disruptive behaviours in the classroom in an effort to avoid reading. Jordan (1996) declared that "meaning" is not in the message, it is in the minds of the individuals involved in the communication relationship; therefore, missed signals during the communication process can create a sense of frustration and confusion, which in the case of minority student might send the wrong message and lead to disruptive behaviour.

### **Disparities in discipline**

Cultural differences have also been suggested to influence disproportionality in school discipline. Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz and Chung (2005) stated that "A relationship between racial or ethnic disparities in discipline and special education referral may be further evidence of a general inability on the part of schools to accommodate cultural differences in behaviour, particularly for African American students" (p. 141). This suggests that cultural differences can affect classroom interaction especially between teachers and students, and further contribute to misdiagnoses of minority students as having behaviour problems. This also suggests that cultural differences can also influence teachers' perceptions of minority students' behaviour, where for example, wait time during interaction varies between cultures. Therefore, during interactions wait time influences classroom participation for minority students. Row (as cited in Bazron, Osher & Fleischman, 2005) found that Pueblo Indian students took twice as much time to respond to instruction compared to Native Hawaiians students. Thus, a teacher who moves on too quickly might falsely assume that Pueblo Indian students are unresponsive or do not understand the concepts being taught which might not be the case.

Conversely, another teacher might naively describe Native Hawaiian students' preference for short wait times and overlapping speech as “acting out”.

Research by Rausch and Skiba (2004) indicated that the highest suspension category falls under the “disruptive” and “other” classification, while weapons and drugs form the lowest category for suspensions in urban schools in the U.S. The “disruptive” and “other” category make up 95% of all suspensions, whereas, drugs, weapons and tobacco make up 2%, 1%, 2% respectively. Again, Rausch and Skiba, found discrepancy in out-of school suspension based on race in the categories of “disruptive behaviour” and “other”. Specifically, African Americans were four times as likely to receive out-of- school suspension for disruptive behaviour and five times more likely for the category of “other” compared to Caucasian’ students while Hispanics are twice as likely to be suspended in these two categories compared to Caucasians.

Additionally, Verdugo (2002) reported that minority students tend to be punished more severely for less serious offences. He pointed out, “White students tended to be suspended for only ‘serious violations’ (e.g. weapons and drugs) while African American students tended to be suspended for vague infractions such as ‘disrespect’ or appearing threatening” (p.60). Skiba, et al. (2000) also noted that minority students are suspended from school more frequently and for longer periods compared to Caucasian students. Similar investigations carried out by Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace & Bachman (2008) found that African Americans males represented a startling 330% of the number of suspensions and expulsions, roughly about 3.3 times the rate of their White male peers. In the same vein, Skiba, Michael, Nardo and Peterson (2002) concluded that African American males have the highest reported suspension rates followed by White males, African American females, and White females, respectively.

This disproportionality is also seen in relation to disciplinary action meted out to minority student. Wallace, et al, (2008) in a large nationally wide study using representative samples of White, Black, Hispanic, Asian American, and American Indian students from 1991 to 2005, observed that Black, Hispanic, and American Indian youth are slightly more likely than White and Asian American youth to be sent to the office and substantially (two to five times) more likely to be suspended or expelled.

Unfortunately, the absence or inaccessibility of statistics on race and disability in Canada makes it difficult to determine whether racial minority students are disproportionately disciplined. Nevertheless, anecdotal evidence available seems to depict that (Bhattacharjee,

2003). The few studies carried out show that visible minority students are disproportionately affected by school discipline practice. A study by Ruck and Wortley (2002) looking at Racial and Ethnic Minority High School Students' Perceptions of School Disciplinary Practices in Greater Toronto Area and other parts of Ontario revealed that there is a strong perception supported by some empirical evidence that teacher treatment, school suspension practices, the use of police by school authorities, and police treatment at school was having a disproportionate impact on racial minority students, particularly Black students, Tamil, Aboriginal and Latino students, are being treated more harshly than other students in the application of discipline for the same offence.

Equally important, data gathered from the Halifax Regional School Board from 1987 to 1992 also revealed the same trend. The report showed that despite the fact that minority students represented only eight percent of the student population, they accounted for 16% to 20% of all suspensions (Bhattacharjee, 2003). Again, in the school year 2002-2003, statistics from three high schools in Ontario revealed that at the first school there were 131 suspensions. The second school had 145 suspensions, and the third school had 65 suspensions. However, almost all of the students who were suspended were visible minority students (Ontario Human Rights Commission).

### **Historical impact**

The traumatic effect of past government policy such as segregation, slavery, residential schools are far reaching and complex on many levels and carries down to present and future minority children (Patton, 1998). These past government policies supported racist beliefs and attitudes which now indirectly impact minority students' school experience and inadvertently affect their academic achievement (Miller, 1996; Barnes, Josefowitz, Cole, 2006). Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado & Chung (2008) mentioned that the overrepresentation of minority students into special education streams from false historical perceptions of minority cultures and people as cognitively inferior to their white counterpart and therefore even with the abolition of such practices that belief still lingers in some educational cycles. In that sense, that philosophy might be contributing to the deficit mentality often evident in schools in regards to minority student's potentials and abilities (Howard, 2008; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Yosso, 2005) and thereby contributing to the high number of minority students in special education.



In furtherance, the effects of history still permeates the present society in that the school system is set in a way that privileges mainstream and marginalizes any deviation from it, and thereby create a deficit mentality for the cultural wealth, knowledge, potential and skills of minority student (Howard, 2008; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Yosso, 2005). Deficit mentality takes different forms and is embedded in daily practices and way of thinking in schools such as assessment and curriculum and teacher attitude (Ford & Whiting, 2007; Valencia, 1997; Weiner, 2006).

Additionally, negative stereotypes formed from historical assumptions and philosophies create low expectations for minority students' academic potential and interest in learning; these negative expectations indirectly have an adverse impact on minority students' performance and teachers' sense of commitment and responsibility towards minority students' success in education (Sleeter 2008; Wolfe & Spencer, 1996).

**Self-esteem and self-identity issue.** Past inequalities and assumptions have created negative stereotypes for historically oppressed minority communities, (Berry, 1999; Skiba et al., 2008) which adversely affect minority youth self-perception and identity. Studies indicate that individuals with a positive ethnic identity have better psychological wellbeing, higher positive self-concept, stronger self-efficacy, higher school grades, and a greater sense of social competence (Ong et al., 2006; Berry, 1999; Outten, Schmitt, Garcia & Branscombe, 2009; Steinberg, 1999). Past racist beliefs have affected some minority people and minority students' self-perceptions of themselves, and teachers' (who are mainly white middle class) perceptions about minority students (Berry, 1999; Corenblum, 1996). To this end Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges III & Jennings (2010) observed that minority students "are less likely to feel motivated to invest in school when they don't feel as if the teachers care about them" (p. 293).

According to Edwards, Holtz and Green (2007) "as children age they begin to grapple with their identity and how they fit into social groups" (p.43). Studies have shown that identity development is crucial to healthy self-development (Erickson, 1968; Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2005; Lee, 2005; Phinney, 1989, 1990). In addition, positive identity development is a necessary factor in order to reach self-actualization (Maslow, 1970). It is an undisputable fact that identity development is a major challenge for all adolescents (Shi & Babrow, 2007). However, the situation is intensely greater for minority youth, who do not only have to develop an identity, but also have to develop a racial identity as well (Miller, 1999). Similarly, Cournane (2007)

mentioned that the exclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in the schools and society in general, results in a loss of pride in Aboriginal identity for Aboriginal youth.

Racial identity as defined by Helms (1990) is “one’s perception that he or she shares a common racial heritage with a particular group” (p. 3). Racial identity can act as a protective factor by providing a sense of identity and a sense of belonging necessary for healthy psychological development. Unfortunately sometimes the need to develop racial identity can encourage the development of negative stereotypical behaviour associated with a particular minority group.

Arroyo and Zigler (1995) noted that racial identity for some minority students living in neighbourhoods where there is a high level of social injustice and negative racial identity may develop destructive identity behaviour. Anderson (1999) stated that youth often create altercations for the sole purpose of building respect (p. 72). Wilkinson (2001) also confirmed the idea that sometimes young minority men commit robberies and other unacceptable behaviour as a way of developing an identity. Similarly, research conducted by Fagan and Wilkinson (1998) found that youth from poor inner city neighbourhoods often used violence for recognition.

A study by Conahan et al, (2003) show that the overrepresentation of African American students in special education is more evident between the fifth and seventh grades. Based on Erickson’s (1968) stages of human development, grades five to nine fit into the identity development stage. Thus, the disruptive behaviours exhibited by minority students at this stage could be due in part to identity formation crises.

In the same vein, the cultural-ecological model of Ogbu (1992) proposed that “involuntary minorities” (non migrant and historically oppressed minorities) underperform in school because of the conflict between ethnic identity and mainstream educational practices. He asserts that involuntary minority youth adopt an oppositional attitude towards education as a way of maintaining distance between themselves and the educational system they distrust. Barbarin (1993) believes that this trend later leads to disaffection with education and an increasing oppositional attitude towards the school system in general. This trend explains why there is a disproportionately high rate of suspension and expulsion for minority youth at the high school level. Furthermore, studies reveal that youth who have personal experience with discrimination have high rates of deviant peer affiliation, violence, anger, and mental health problems and

disengage from school (Schmader, Major, & Gramzow, 2001, Ogbu 1992; Barnes, et al., 2006; Brody et al. 2006; Wong, Eccles & Sameroff, 2003).

Moreover, Simons, Chen, Stewart, Brody (2003) found evidence that racism negatively affected minority students' identity, and has influence on behaviour problem especially for minority males. According to Smith and Silva (2011) ethnic identity is "More than a mere cognitive heuristic or coping strategy, ethnic identity pervades both worldview and behavior" (pg 42). Hence when children are exposed to discrimination or racism, it negatively impacts their behavior. Additionally, research reveals there is an association between ethnic identity and mental health symptoms. Experience of racism and discrimination create heightened distress (Yoo & Lee, 2008; Sellers & Shelton, 2003; McCoy & Major, 2003; Berry, 1999) which might indirectly contribute to disruptive behavior for minority youth. On the other hand, a positive Ethnic identity is strongly related to positive well-being (Smith & Silva, 2011) especially for adolescents and youth. Hence a positive Ethnic identity can provide a sense of strength for minority youth (Ponterotto & Park-Taylor, 2007).

### **Classroom environment**

The phenomenon of focusing on the child as the problem or focusing on the source of the problem as within the child has obscured viewing learning and behaviour problems as partly due to school environment or the larger macro environment of the child (Harry, Klingner, Sturges, & Moore, 2002). Research by Wenglinsky (2002) supported the evidence that classroom practices and teacher characteristics play an important role in student academic performance and behaviour. Wenglinsky hypothesized that the effect of teacher quality (classroom practice, training received in professional development, teacher input and educational attainment of the teacher) has equal effect on students' success as students' background. This assumption is based on the premise that student learning is an interaction between the teacher and student. The results of the study confirmed the hypothesis that teachers' characteristics positively correlated with students' achievement "suggesting that teachers can contribute as much to student learning as the students themselves" (Wenglinsky, 2002, p. 1).

Interactions between teachers and students play a vital role in motivating, eliciting and exacerbating students' attitudes and disruptive behaviour. According to Palmers (2003) teaching is relational. It is an art not science, implying that to a greater extent teaching depends on how a teacher interacts with the students and his/ her ability to build positive relationship with the

students. Research suggests that positive classroom environment which is characterised by love, respect and safety enables students to excel and minimize students' disruption (McAdamis, 2001). On the other hand, a bad classroom interaction can have devastating effect on students' learning and behaviour.

Equally important, studies also suggest that teachers' classroom management skills can impact students' achievement (Obenchain, & Taylor 2005; Kayikci, 2009; Desiderio & Mullennix, 2005). Kunter, Baumert and Köller (2007) in a study looking at effective classroom management and the development of subject-related interest revealed that classroom management strategies and students' interest are positively related. Additionally, Stronge, Ward, Tucker & Hindman (2007) illustrated that effective teachers tend to ask a greater number of higher level questions and have fewer incidences of off-task behavior in their classroom.

Again, the kind of classroom environment, teacher personality, and characteristics make a difference in whether a student is referred for special education program or not, especially in the high incidence category of disabilities. Teachers' experience and definition of disruptive behavior also makes a difference in whether a student is referred for behavior problem or not. Moreover, teacher characteristics have been proven to be a significant predictor of school success. In a study conducted in Alberta by Alberta Ministry of Education (2009), teacher's experience positively correlated with the number of students who graduated; they found that in schools where the average teacher's experience exceeded 10 years, over 75% of the students graduated within three years of high school while schools with the average teacher experience was less than 10 years only 64 % of the students graduated in three years (Richards & Scott, 2009). Furthermore a number of researches have revealed that teachers' cultural and racial competence play a factor in their ability to be successful with minority students (Foster, 1995; Howard, 2008; Lynn, 2006).

### **Assessment**

One explanation for the high representation of minority students in special education has been bias in the assessment process. Research indicates that the higher representation of minority students occurs in the high-incidence categories like mild mental retardation (MMR), emotional disturbance (ED), learning disabilities (LD), and behavior disorder, which do not necessarily require a medical diagnosis (Overton, 2000). Hence in most cases, the referrals are based on individual teachers' judgment. Cross and Donovan (2002) noted that these high incidence

disabilities are often first identified in the school context and the disability diagnosis is typically given without confirmation of any organic root cause. Arnold and Lassmann (2003) also asserted that a student can move from one state to another state and "get over" a high incidence diagnosis (p.232). Arnold and Lassmann uses the term "get over" to refer to a condition in which a student first designated as special needs student is able to succeed in the regular school curriculum without special education accommodations. This situation is ironic in the sense that most disability diagnoses are supposed to be lifelong. Thus it is the very nature of these high incidence disabilities and the frequency with which they occur that contribute to misdiagnoses in the referral and placement of minority students. For example, a child identified as having a behavior problem can move to a different school with good resources and the necessary supports like highly skilled teachers, effective classroom management and instruction and be able to perform at grade level and would not need to be referred for special education services.

Echoing similar sentiment Mattson & Caffrey (2001) questioned the assessment process of First Nations students. They expressed their concerns that a lack of culturally sensitive assessment tools often result in inappropriate misplacement of First Nations students into special education.

Moreover, the lack of educational psychologists or professionals to contribute to the assessment process increases the probability of misdiagnoses. Most schools in poor or rural communities do not have access to an educational psychologist to help in the assessment process. They rely on teachers and education assistants for making assessment. Evidence from research conducted by Conahan et al, (2003) supported this claim. They proposed that if students were being appropriately placed in special education then the distribution of ethnic groups should also reflect the distribution of ethnic groups in the total school population. The researchers trained the teachers in effective classroom management skills, instruction and pre referral screening so that referrals were only made for students who really needed assistance beyond differentiation in teaching and classroom management, were referred for further testing. By the end of the first year of the intervention, the disproportionate representation of African Americans in special education programs in the school had been reduced by 68%.

Patton (1998) believes that ethnicity does play a role in the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education referrals, even where there is no

deliberate intent to discriminate by race. Patton argued that science is not value free. Similarly Conahan et al, (2003) concurred that

The 'science of assessment' tends to generate a methodology that affects not only the way events are measured, but the probability of possible outcomes that we can conceive and their meaning. Therefore when assessment systematically over-selects one particular group as 'disabled' then the whole discourse needs to be examined (para.15).

Conahan et al, argued that it is not just due to chance that African American boys are systematically tested, diagnosed, and referred for special education at such a high rate or at rates double their percentage in the total school population. Again, according to Donovan and Cross (2002) most of these disruptive behaviours for which minority students are referred are only identified in the school, and teachers often do not ascertain if these behaviours also occur in the students' homes before they are referred.

**Effect of wrong assessment.** According to Prior (2004) "our identities are supported and altered by various forms of identification" (p.88). Thus, misplacement of minority students in special education due to wrong assessment can sometimes lead to other negative behaviour. Students who are inappropriately placed in special education programs may develop low cognitive competence, low self-concept and learned helplessness. For instance, in a situation, where a minority student does not share the link between the "misbehaviour" and the consequence, the student might interpret it as random aggression, and that his/her behaviour has no influence on the teacher's consequent reaction. Subsequently, the student is conditioned to respond to the teacher's expectations through reliance on reward and punishment, which in the long run wipes out all intrinsic motivation and distorts the student's ability to assess his/her behaviour independently.

Sutherland and Singh (2004) suggest that students who develop learned helplessness learn that responding and reinforcement are independent, therefore are less likely to initiate responses or change. In the same vein, Seligman, 1975 (as cited in Sutherland and Singh) point out that "learned helplessness produces three deficits: (a) an undermining of one's motivation to respond; (b) a retardation of one's ability to learn that responding works; and (c) an emotional disturbance, usually depression or anxiety" (p.171).

**Proper assessment.** In light of the detrimental effect of inappropriate referral, certain measures must be considered to ensure that proper assessments are carried out. Proper assessment must be contextually sensitive and must take into consideration the broader macro environment of the child. Teachers should withhold judgement unless a child has not responded to high quality intervention, before making judgement about whether a child should be referred for special education services, particularly in the cases of high incidence disabilities (Conahan et al, 2003).

Additionally, the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) specifically states that the disruptive behaviour must “not simply be a reaction to the immediate social context” (DSM IV p. 96). Therefore it is important to consider the context under which disruptive behaviour occurs before making a referral.

It is also important to check if this disruptive behaviour occurs in multiple settings when making the assessment. The DSM-IV points out that the disruptive behaviour must occur in a variety of settings before labelling.

Equally important, parents and other professionals should be involved in the process of assessment. Many schools do not have educational psychologists or other professionals like counsellors and social workers to help and give correct assessment of students. Again parental involvement in the assessment process would give insight and a better understanding of their children’s behaviour.

### **Using Culturally Responsive Education as Interventions**

A lot of studies have identified cultural and socio-economic factors as contributing to the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education programs (Drakeford, 2006; Hosp & Hosp, 2002). Based on this premise, a Culturally Responsive Education (CRE) will be an effective way to combat this problem. Culturally Responsive Education can be defined as “using cultural reference and knowledge, prior experiences and performance styles of diverse students to make learning more appropriate and effective” for students (Gay, 2002, p. 29). It is based on the assumption that culture plays a major role in the academic success of minority students. More important, Culturally Responsive Education takes into consideration not only the cultural background of the students but the whole macro environment of the students.

According Kujawa and Huske (1995) Culturally Responsive Schools have the following characteristics:

1. The curriculum content is inclusive, meaning it reflects the cultural, ethnic, and gender diversity of society and the world
2. Instructional and assessment practices build on the students' prior knowledge, culture, and language
3. Classroom practices stimulate students to construct knowledge, make meaning, and examine cultural biases and assumptions
4. School-wide beliefs and practices that foster an understanding and respect for cultural diversity, and celebrate the contributions of diverse groups
5. School programs and instructional practices that draw from and integrate community, family, language, culture, and help families and communities to support the students' academic success. (Education Alliance at Brown University, 2005, p. 1)

A study by Ogbu and Simons (1994) showed that minority students are often negatively affected by the discontinuity between the culture and language at home and in schools. Thus, the absence of continuity and consistency between the children's home culture and the school can interfere with their functioning in the new setting. This idea is supported by the Education Alliance at Brown University (2005) that children whose language and culture correspond more closely to the school culture have an advantage in the learning process while children whose languages and experiences are unrecognized develop a sense of alienation and are disengaged from the learning process.

Thus, an introduction of Culturally Responsive Education will allow students to be taught using meaningful materials that relate to both home and school experiences. Culturally Responsive Education uses the child's culture to build a bridge between the two cultures upon which the student is able to make meaning of what is taught at school and transfer that knowledge between the two cultures (Ladson-Billings, 1994). Moreover, research has shown that where the students and teachers are knowledgeable about each others' culture, learning is enhanced (McCarty & Watahomigie, 1999). Hollins (1996) observed that cultural practices shape thinking processes; therefore, in order to enable students to develop higher order thinking, students' cultural background should be incorporated in school learning.



## **Development of the total child**

A Culturally Responsive Education will help develop the students' total being such as the intellect, social, and ethical development, simultaneously (Novick, 1996). Caine and Caine (1990) stated that "the brain is designed as a pattern detector, perceiving relationships and making connections fundamental to the learning process. Thoughts, emotions, imagination, and predispositions operate concurrently and are interrelated" (p. 3). Hence, learning does not only involve the brain but the whole physiology.

Again, Caine and Caine, (1990) indicated that neuron growth, nourishment and synaptic interactions are related to the perception and interpretation of one's experiences. Thus stress and other non-conducive environment affect the functioning of the brain. On the other hand, a healthy school environment characterized by peace, respect, and acceptance would improve the performance of mental processes including information retrieval. This notion is affirmed by Maslow's (1970) theory of needs. Maslow proposed that in order for people to reach their optimal performance, their basic needs like self-esteem, love, and sense of belonging must first be met. Culturally Responsive Education enhances students' mental performance by ensuring a good learning environment that promotes healthy functioning of the brain.

Culturally Responsive Education helps create a caring school. Schaps (2003) listed four important issues when creating a caring school. The first is the need for emotional and physical safety; second is the need for close, supportive relationships for a sense of "connectedness" or "belongingness"; the third being the need for autonomy, or a say in what happens to us; and the last being a sense of competence, which is the belief that we are capable beings and able to learn and succeed. Schaps stated that "these fundamental needs shape human motivation and have major implications for learning and development. We are willing to work very hard to preserve our sense of safety, belonging, autonomy, and competence" (p.31). In the same way, a child who is wrongly misdiagnosed develops a sense of incompetence and is not motivated to learn. Likewise, a minority student who feels threatened may act aggressively or hostile as a means of protecting himself/herself, and in a way may help explain the reasons why there is a large proportion of minority males referred for behaviour problems.

## **Reduction in disruptive behaviour**

Bazron, Osher, and Fleischman (2005) asserted that Culturally Responsive Education can strengthen student connectedness with schools, reduce behaviour problems, and enhance

learning. Bazron et al. (2005), suggest that schools should use culturally sensitive and respectful approaches in character development, social skill instruction, and discipline for minority students. In the same vein, Osher, Dwyer, and Jackson, (2004) observed that a culturally sensitive restitution approach to discipline enhances both the students' self-esteem and their willingness to become responsible community members.

What is more, a Culturally Responsive Education approach to discipline helps develop the total individual (Novick, 1996). This view is also held by the medicine wheel approach to education. A Culturally Responsive Education will help students understand, deal and regulate their emotions in order to control their behaviour. Students are encouraged to express their views and feelings. Culturally Responsive Education provide explicit opportunities for children to practice skills such as personal and group goal setting, decision making, problem solving, and conflict resolution.

Goleman, (1996) emphasized the importance of teachers acknowledging and dealing positively with students' emotions. According to Goleman, the physiology of the brain indicates that learning and strong emotions compete for space in the working memory. Emotional intelligence refers to self-control, diligence, self-motivation, interpersonal skills, and knowing and controlling one's emotions. What is more, Goleman asserted that an individual's success is 80% dependent on his emotional intelligence and 20% dependent on their academic intelligence. Krevans and Gibbs (1996) also suggested that student' emotions such as anger, fear, and sadness need to be resolved before students can effectively function.

Moreover, Culturally Responsive Education will enable both students and teachers to be more knowledgeable about each others' culture, which will provide better understanding and improve student-teacher interaction. Thereby, reducing the number of referrals of minority students, for example, a teacher who is culturally sensitive would adjust his or her wait time to encourage positive social interactions in the classroom for minority students. Evidence from the Cross-Cultural Awareness Education and Training for Professionals Manual (1985) affirms this idea:

Research shows that white English speakers pause an average of a half second to indicate they have finished a thought and that it is proper and polite for the other person to speak. If the other person does not pick up the cue within that half –second, the original speaker is permitted to continue. For most Athabaskan bands, on the other hand, the appropriate

pause time is a second and a half. For the Tiwa members of the Taos Pueblo, unconscious factor can have serious effect on white –Native American dialogue. The native feels the white man has no desire to listen to him because he never stops talking while the white man feels the native has nothing to say. (p. 4)

Therefore, a teacher who is culturally sensitive would provide the necessary support for such students instead of misjudging the students.

### **Self-concept**

Culturally Responsive Education will promote good cultural identity which may reduce attention seeking disruptive behaviour like acting out or being aggressive (Ang, Neubronner, Oh & Leong 2006). A study by Ang et al., showed that positive self-concept is associated with academic efficacy while negative self-concept is associated with disruptive behaviour. Ang et al, conducted a study with 153, seventh grade Asian students in Singapore using the Rosenberg self-esteem scale to measure their self-esteem. A multiple regression analysis revealed that positive self-esteem was predictive of mastery goal orientation and self efficacy while negative self-concept predicted disruptive behaviour.

In addition, Culturally Responsive Education enables minority students to develop confidence through self identification and appreciation of their culture. Echoing this sentiment, the Honourable Guay, past Minister of Education, Ontario (1977) stated that:

The concept of multiculturalism recognizes that each of our young people needs to develop confidence through a sense of self-identity and a feeling of self-worth. Good pedagogy tells us that as an individual and as a member of a particular ethnic or cultural group the student functions best if full use is made of the traditions and experiences which are integral to home culture and therefore to student wellbeing (Dubois, 1977 p. 3).

Similarly, Cournane (2007) mentioned that exclusion of Aboriginal cultural knowledge in schools and society as a whole, result in a loss of pride in Aboriginal identity for Aboriginal youth.

Further, Gay (2002) described a culturally responsive education as validating, empowering, transformative and emancipatory. Gay goes on to say that, "The validation, information, and pride it generates are both psychologically and intellectually liberating" (p. 35). More so, Culture Responsive Education enables teachers to gain knowledge about the different

cultures, recognize, respect, and use students' identities and backgrounds for creating excellent learning environments (Nieto, 2000). Thus, in order to create equitable education for all students there is the need to introduce a Culture Responsive Education, and acknowledge and support the everyday strength and skills minority students possess outside of the classroom and use these skills in their learning.

### **Chapter Summary**

Within this chapter, I presented a review of the literature regarding the nature of disproportionate representation of minority students receiving special education programs. The literature also explores the risk factors associated with the over representation. The factors identified included socioeconomic status, gender, cultural difference, impact of history, environment, disparity in disciplinary practice and assessment. Additionally, a conceptual framework was provided which advocated for the need and importance of a Cultural Responsive Education that will help validate minority students and recognize their strength and skills, which will improve minority students' school experience and foster academic growth for these students. In the following chapter I outline the research methodology I employed for this research.

### **CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

This chapter discusses the methodological framework for this study. The chapter consists of six topics: the research method, the selection of participants, data collection method, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations for the research.

#### **Research Method**

This study employed a qualitative approach for several reasons. First, the use of a qualitative approach allows for a deeper investigation into participants' perceptions where they can provide detailed explanations of event(s) that can be highly informative as noted by (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2007). Qualitative research allows us to ask the questions concerning "how" and "what is happening and provides for detailed explanation of events.

Second, a qualitative approach to this topic is relatively unique, so may reveal new aspects to be identified as well as allowing some comparison with identified variables (Creswell, 1998; Silverman, 2005). Guba and Lincoln (1983) noted that sometimes manipulating variables and studying them is not enough to provide deeper understanding of a phenomenon.

Third, a qualitative approach, particularly involving interviewing can allow a more detailed understanding of participants' perceptions and insights into their experience (Kvale, 1996). This allows for the possibility of capturing subtle but valuable information that might be missed in a quantitative approach (Creswell, 1998; Seidman, 1998).

Finally, as Creswell and Plano-Clark, (2007) pointed out, a researcher is an active learner who is in reality telling a story. The use of participants' stories revealed through interviews is a supportive and generative process allowing the revelation of human experience that is accessible to us.

#### **Study Site**

This study was conducted in a mid-western Canadian city. It is a fast growing city with a vibrant economy that attracts thousands of people from various ethno-cultural backgrounds. The city recorded an increase in population of 2.8% from 2001- 2006 placing it among the fastest growing cities of Canada (Statistics Canada 2006 Census). It has a population of over 202,340, (Statistics Canada 2006 Census) with a population density of approximately 1305.5/ km. Most important this city is culturally diverse. Consequently, a study of this nature has the potential to benefit the city. Lastly, the city has two main school division and both school boards offer

special education programs for students who are referred for such services. For the purposes of this study the name of the city will be called Birdnest.

### **Selection of Participants**

Creswell & Plano-Clark, (2007) noted that intentionally selecting participants who have experience with the key concept being explored often leads to the hope of obtaining more meaningful information. As a result, participants were intentionally selected to ensure that meaningful, detailed, and relevant information was gathered. This involved identifying a number of community members who are involved in advancing minority issues. I contacted and invited participants to take part in the study. Other participants were contacted and referred to the researcher by a committee member who had worked with them in the past. I also contacted several people she knew in the community who were involved in education and special education. Participants selected consisted of parents, community leaders, and education professionals involved in special education.

The selection criteria were different for the three participant groups.

The selection criteria for the school professional category were:

- Over five years teaching experience or a professional with experience in Special Education in the Canadian school system.
- Must have taught in Western Canada for the past 5 years or had their professional career in Western Canada.

For the parents' category, the criterion was:

- Be a parent or guardian of a student who is in special education or had received special education in the past.

Community leaders were identified based on their contribution to minority community and the following:

- Must be of minority heritage.
- Must be a person who has influence in the minority community.
- Someone who acts as an advocate for minority issues.
- Someone who is a head of an organization that advocate for minority issues.
- Must be a respected successful minority person in the larger community.

Potential participants were contacted either by phone, e-mail or personally.

Eight participants were selected in order to provide different perspectives on the topic. Sandelowski (1995) stated that

Determining adequate sample size in qualitative research is ultimately a matter of judgment and experience in evaluating the quality of the information collected against the uses to which it will be put, the particular research method and purposeful sampling strategy employed, and the research product intended. (p. 1)

Six participants were initially planned for but two participants were later referred and after meeting the participants I decided that the two participants also had deep and rich knowledge that would enrich the study so it was decided to include the additional participants. Again, one of the strengths of a qualitative study is the use of small sample size. Thus, having only eight participants provided an opportunity for an in depth discussion and exploration of the topic (Creswell, 2009).

The eight participants consisted of two parents, three professional educators, and three community leaders. The three professional educators consisted of one administrator (school principal), one Special Education teacher, and one Educational Assistant. Pseudonyms were assigned to the participants and those they mentioned to protect their identities.

**Expertise of the participants.** These participants were selected because they offered rich experience and insight in the issue of minority students' education. The participants had a range of experiences in terms of age, life experience and education. They all share a common characteristic such as: majority of the participants had children who had been through the educational system or currently in the education system. They all shared the experience of being parents and having worked in the education system even though they had different professional capacities now. All of them had been teachers at one point in their lives although some of them were not presently involved in teaching in the classroom; they are still involved in education in one way or another.

While they had commonalities they also had a range of different school experiences. Some of the participants went through the residential school system; some went through catholic and public school systems while one person had a foreign school experience.

### **Data Collection**

I sought ethics approval from the University of Saskatchewan Ethics Board before the commencement of data collection. The data collection process primarily involved the use of

semi-structured interviews. According to Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) the data collection in qualitative research basically consists of open-ended information that the researcher gathers through interviews with participants. Along this line, the study utilized semi-structured interview and open ended questionnaires.

An advantage of semi-structured interviewing is the flexibility for the interviewer and interviewee, and the use of follow up questions to explore topics in detail (Silverman, 2004).

After I had received responses from prospective participants who showed interest in the study, these people were contacted and the purpose of the study explained; reviewed their rights to participate and any necessary information related to the study.

Arrangements were made through e-mail or telephone to schedule a meeting. The ethics documents including a letter of invitation, list of questions, consent form and transcript release forms were attached through e-mail and provided in advance of the interview. Before the start of each interview, the content of the ethics documents were reviewed verbally. The interviews were taped with an audio recorder and later transcribed. The transcripts together with transcript release forms were sent back to the participants for review providing an opportunity for them to edit the documents as they desired. The researcher picked up the transcript release forms from the participants after they had been signed. The participants were given the opportunity to select the location of the interview.

In most cases, the researcher visited the participants once or twice to further build rapport and trust with them before the interview. The researcher and the participants then made another appointment for interviewing. Each interview session lasted between 45 – 90 minutes. The data were then transcribed and sent back to the participants to verify the information and to add any new insights they might have had after the interview.

**Interviewing.** According to Kvale (1996) research interviews are not a spontaneous arbitrary exchange of ideas but “a conversation that has structure and a purpose” (p. 6). As a result, an interview guide was developed to help guide the direction of the interview. Kvale explained that an interview guide may contain rough topics to be covered and suggested question or detailed sequence of questions. Hence, the interview guide was flexible; the researcher asked other probing questions depending on the responses given by participants. The interview guide was adapted from Seidman’s (1998) three – interview structure: namely “who”, “when” and “how” to guide the interview process. The “who” explains the subjects’ life history, the “when”



guides the interview about the participants' contemporary experience or his/ her experiences in relation to the phenomenon, while the "how" entails reflection on meaning respectively. See Appendix -D a copy of the interview guide

The researcher sent the transcripts to the participants for a review before using the data. Additionally, the participants were also allowed to express any other important issues they wanted to talk about in relation to the topic.

Glesne and Peshkin (1992) stated that in qualitative research, the "researcher becomes the main instrument as he or she observes, asks questions, and interacts with research participants" (p.6). In line with this statement, the researcher practised her interview skills techniques with friends before embarking on the real interview with the participants.

### **Design and Analysis of Data**

According to Bogdan and Biklen (1982) qualitative data analysis involves "working with data, organizing it, breaking it into manageable units, synthesizing it, searching for patterns, discovering what is important and what is to be learned, and deciding what to tell others" (p.145). Consistent with this, the interview data were transcribed into text then from reviewed to gain a general understanding of what was said and then examined further to identify any for trends and themes that existed within the data. The data were then further grouped into categories and themes. Creswell (2009) noted that grouping of the data into themes aids in identifying any interrelatedness or relationships between the themes. Thus, after careful analysis and examination the researcher selected themes based on the relevant ideas, frequency and significance of ideas in relation to the research question. According to Patton (2001) the researcher by developing expertise in the topic area essentially becomes the research "instrument" and so has the capacity to offer meaningful interpretation (Donmoyer 1985).

Next, the data were then used to complement or affirm each theme. Interactions between the themes were also noted and recorded in the reporting. The result was then summarized and presented in a descriptive statement form. The results were used to answer the research questions by comparing and affirming the data based on previous research and literature reviews on the topic.

### **Trustworthiness**

Trustworthiness is of special importance to any qualitative research. According to Lincoln & Guba (1985) trustworthiness provides grounds or serves as a foundation to support the

argument that the research findings are “worth paying attention to” (p.290). Additionally, Denzin (1994) postulated that, “Trustworthiness consists of four components: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability” (p.508). Hence, the researcher took steps to ensure that the study possessed credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. Credibility can be defined as an evaluation of whether or not the research findings are an accurate interpretation of the data drawn from the participants’ original data (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005a). Creswell (2009) also stated that “increasing validity is one of the strengths of qualitative research, and it is based on determining whether the findings are accurate from the standpoint of the researcher, the participant, or the readers of an account” (p.191). To address credibility, the transcripts were returned to the respective participants for accuracy and to ensure that the content reflected what they intended to express and to avoid misinterpretation by the researcher (Best & Kahn, 1998). Three of the participants made changes, and or additions to their transcripts. Additionally, Creswell (2009) recommended self-reflection as one way of building credibility. He explained that

self- reflection creates an open and honest narrative that will resonate well with readers. Good qualitative research contains comments by the researchers about how their interpretation of the findings is shaped by their background, such as their gender, culture, history, and socioeconomic origin (p.192).

Thus, personal biases of the researcher which can influence the interpretation of the results were disclosed in the first chapter one of the document.

Equally important, I included both negative and opposing information that run counter to the themes during the analysis of the data. Creswell argues that “by presenting this contradictory evidence, the account becomes more realistic and hence valid” (p.192). Moreover, the study was reviewed by an external examiner to enhance its credibility. Creswell again asserted that involving an external source to examine the whole aspect of the research adds to the overall credibility of the study.

The next criterion is transferability. Transferability is the degree to which results of one study is applicable to other situations (Merriam, 1988; Seale, 1999). In order to address issues relating to transferability, a copy of the data used to generate the answer to the research question will be stored secured with the university for five years. This access to paper trail gives other

researchers the ability to repeat, as closely as possible the procedures of this project and or to transfer the conclusions of this inquiry to other cases.

The third criterion of establishing trustworthiness is dependability. Dependability “is concerned with the stability of the data over time” (Guba & Lincoln p. 242). Issues of dependability was established by creating an interview guide to ensure that all the participants were asked a basic set of question upon which further probing questions emerged . The basic set of questions served or created a consistency in the questions asked which added to the dependability of the results.

The last criterion is confirmability. The concept of confirmability in a qualitative inquiry is comparable to concerns for objectivity in a quantitative study. In this regard, confirmability was ensured through voluntary participation of participants. The research was voluntary which ensured that the participants opinions were more likely honest information from the participants view point and were not coerced in any way to provide information to that the researcher wanted to hear. This voluntary participation enhanced the research’s confirmability.

### **Ethical considerations**

The study sought approval from the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science before beginning the study. Participants’ protection and confidentiality was of utmost importance to the researcher. According to Fink and Kosecoff (1998) “ethical considerations protect the individual’s right to privacy or even anonymity” (p.36). Consequently, the researcher followed the University of Saskatchewan Advisory Committee on Ethics in Behavioural Science Guidelines to ensure maximum protection for the participants.

### **Summary**

This chapter described the research design used to explore the perceptions of teachers, community leaders and parents regarding minority students in special education. This study utilized a qualitative research design for investigating this topic. Furthermore, a detailed description of the six topic areas of this chapter was provided: research design, participant selection, data collection methods, data analysis, trustworthiness, and ethical considerations. Each of the methods were described and explained. The study used interviewing as the data collection method. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed, coded and categorized into

themes. An inductive procedure of inferring themes and patterns was used in the data analysis. Lastly issues relating to trustworthiness were also addressed.

## **CHAPTER 4: Results and Discussion**

### **Chapter overview**

This chapter presents the findings from the participants' interviews and has three main sections. The first provides descriptions of the participants. The second is a discussion of the research findings in relation to previous studies. The third provides a summary of the results.

### **Description of participants**

#### **Charity**

Charity is a distinguished minority leader. She is of a First Nations background and has extensive experience in teaching the language and traditions of the First Nations people. Additionally, she is an educator and professor at a university in Western Canada. She also has an extensive experience working in Aboriginal research. She has written several journal articles, books and made presentations on various issues relating to First Nations education in Canada. Moreover, she has served on different boards, and has received numerous awards for her contributions towards advancing Aboriginal research and lives in general. She first started her career as a trained teacher and has practical experience in the classroom both at the intermediate and middle school levels of education as well as at the post secondary education level. She has been actively involved in teaching and doing research for the past 39 years.

#### **Ray**

Ray is of Native American heritage. He has been a community leader for more than 40 years starting at the age of about 14 years. He has served as a community leader in different capacities and has been very instrumental in advancing Aboriginal people's rights in Canada. Ray comments on how he became a community leader were interesting. He mentioned that it was imposed on him. Again, he stated that in his community people do not seek it (community leadership): the community chooses you based on your exemplary life. He continues to play a vital role in advancing aboriginal culture, knowledge and rights in Canada and the world. In addition to this, He is also a parent and has had the experience of his children passing through the education system.

#### **Rain**

He has a First Nation's background. He was born, raised and has lived in Saskatchewan for most of his life time. He has a lot of experience in the education system. He is an Acting Executive Director for Education for one of the First Nations' organizations. He has also been a

Special Education teacher, a classroom teacher, an Educational Psychologist, and a Special Education Program Manager in a First Nation community. He holds a Bachelor of Education and a Masters Degree in Special Education.

#### Kimba

Kimba is an immigrant mother from Uganda. She has been living in Canada for over fifteen (15) years. She trained as a teacher in Uganda and taught for a few years there. She has also served on various boards and actively involved in helping other immigrant population and new immigrants who have just settled down in the community. She is married to a Canadian and has a son called Tomba. Tomba was diagnosed with Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder Attention (ADHD) at the age of five. She has also been involved in international humanitarian work outside Canada. She is currently pursuing a graduate degree at the University of Saskatchewan.

#### Tamara

Tamara has a First Nation's background. She is married with two kids. She has a Bachelor in Education and worked as educational assistant before taking her education degree. She presently works at a university in western Canada supporting Aboriginal students in their post secondary education. Her son's name is Brandon. Brandon is five years old and has been experiencing problems at school. At the time of the interview, the school was suggesting medication as a form of control for his behavior even though he has not yet been assessed. She came from a single parent home and was raised in the traditional First Nations' family system with support from her extended family. She is a positive and self-motivated individual who has strong ties to her culture and traditions.

#### Betty

Betty is a White single mom. She was married to an immigrant man of African descent. She has three biracial children from her marriage. Having her children presently passing through the system gives Betty first hand insight in to the experiences of visible minority students. She was born and raised in a predominately white community in rural Saskatchewan but has travelled a lot and appear to be very open minded. Equally important, she is both a mother and a professional in the present school system. She has an English degree (B.A) and has worked as an Education Assistant for about seven years. At the time of her interview she was taking

Education classes to become a certified classroom teacher and interning with the school board. She has a very positive outlook on life and really enjoys meeting new people and traveling.

Barb

Barb is also White. She was born and raised in Saskatoon. She has lived almost all her life in Saskatoon and went through the public school system as a child. She is married with children. She works as a certified special education teacher. In addition, she has over 10 years' experience as a special education teacher. She presently works in an inner city elementary school and service students from kindergarten to grade eight. She started her career as a general classroom teacher then later went back to the university to get her special education certification. Apparently, her interest in teaching came about during her schooling years as a child. She reported having a lot of difficult times at school. She experienced bullying and being picked on by other kids which eventually led her to switching schools but she had a very compassionate teacher which made a big difference in her life. So as early as grade four Barb decided to be a teacher and not only that but in her words "a compassionate teacher". Later on in her youth, she spent some time volunteering with people living with disabilities; it was during this time that she realized she wanted to work with people with disabilities and to assist them live more independent and fully functioning lives. Her experiences of being bullied as a child and also volunteering with people who had disabilities shaped her as a person and as a teacher.

Mary

Mary has a First Nation's background. She also grew up in Saskatoon. She came from an impoverished single parent family but worked her way up to become a teacher and later a principal in the school district. She has experience working in both the Provincial and Federal school system. She holds a Bachelor degree in Education and a Masters degree in Education Administration. She has children who went through the school system and one child who had some private school education as well. She went through the Catholic school system herself. She started schooling about 3 years after Aboriginal children were allowed into provincial schools. Moreover, she has been involved in education for the past 19 years and has over 10 years' experience of being a school principal at the elementary and high school levels.

## **Research Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the research findings in relation to the research questions. Themes generated from the participants responses were used to answer the research question. I offer themes and bring evidence for, and also offer a discussion about how the research findings relate to previous studies. A summary of the themes are presented in this chapter. It is important to clarify that these results pertain to only the research participants and may not necessarily be representative of the general population; the sample size is not large enough to make generalizations but the presence of these themes can be informative simply by revealing their presence. Furthermore, this study is an exploratory study to establish stakeholders' perceptions on overrepresentation of minority students in special education and can offer only conclusions and recommendations in this regard. Further studies will need to be carried out if more wide ranging conclusion and recommendation are to be offered.

### **Research Questions**

The following research questions framed the study, the main question being:

1. If, How and to what extent do teachers, community leaders, parents perceive that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education in Canada?

And the sub questions:

What are the perceptions of teachers, community leaders and parents regarding:

1. What factors contribute to the referral of minority students into special education?
  - i. Does a child's economic status playing a role in the referral of students for special education?
2. How do teachers' perceptions, attitudes, expectations and behaviour influence minority students being placed in special education?
3. How do differences in culture contribute to minority students' placement in special education?
4. How does gender influence the referral of students for special education services in schools?
5. What measures, if any, might be used or put in place to prevent the over representation of minority students in special education?



The fundamental question of this research was to find if, how and to what extent do teachers, community leaders and parents perceive that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education in Canada?

In response to this question all the participants agreed that there was an overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

Oh, it's over-represented, I often have seen a huge number of children and I question if it's a kind of, I don't know how to say it, a kind of an over-representation because ..... (I was) I would have to say very surprised at how high the number was in the designated students that were received at the provincial level and we worked very hard as a staff and a lot of them, within two years, were taken off the special education level so it really sent a strong message to me that there is something going on here. (Mary)

Well, because I was working in a First Nations school, the ratio is automatically going to be quite high as far as First Nations or minorities in special education. A concern I found, when I was interning here in the city was a lot of the kids that had their own T.A.s, ... a lot of them were minorities. It was quite often the kids that would spend time in the hallways always because they weren't able to be handled within the classroom were minorities. (Tamara)

“ well, remedial resource room, it's definitely high. I would say like two thirds easily”. (Betty).

“ .... Yes, I would agree that there is more minorities in special education. (Barb).

I would have to say yes. Yes, I think there is an over representation. The difficult part is trying to discern why there is an over representation, and that's all in their question, but, the data clearly shows that there is a huge representation of First Nations in Special Education. (Rain).

“The students that are in resource, over half of them, either English is going to be their second language, they have just come in from another country or they are aboriginal, they are First Nations” (Betty).

The results of the study supported previous research that there is an over representation of minority students in special education especially children of African American and American Indian heritage (Shippen, Curtis & Miller, 2009; Pewewardy & Fitzpartrick, 2009; Arnold & Lassmann, 2003; de Valenzuela, Copeland, Qi, & Park, 2006; Artiles, Rueda, Salazar, & Higareda, 2005). Additionally, a report by the Ministry of Education - British Columbia

Aboriginal Education Branch and Special Programs Branch (2001) revealed that there were more students of aboriginal heritage in special education in British Columbia's schools in Canada (Morin, 2004).

Moreover, a report by Tough (2009) on the Incidence and Prevalence of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder (FASD) in Alberta and Canada indicated that the prevalence rate of FASD among Aboriginal population was 4.7 compared to 0.250 for non Aboriginal population. Moreover, a 2009 -2010 annual special education report by Georgia Department of Education (2010) indicates that the special education ratio is high for minority students especially American Indian and African American students. The incidence rate for American Indians was 12.06 and 11.11 % for African American respectively. The report also revealed that 525 American Indian students were in special education out of total enrolment of 4352 American Indians, while 69,956 African American students were in needed special education services out of total enrolment of 629584 African American.

Similarly, one of the participants also commented on the fact that the overrepresentation of minority students in special education is more prevalent in the high incidence category.

Special education has such a (diversity), where things that are genetic such as Down's Syndrome or being born deaf or blind are definitely more random, but some areas of special education like Fetal alcohol syndrome, which can be prevented, I do see more minority students having that difficulty, maybe because it's cultural or not, I worked with one boy who was deaf and blind from shaken baby syndrome where it was definitely something that could have been prevented but it was an accident but when he's seven months old and now he has this impairment for the rest of his life it's very difficult. (Barb).

Barb's statement accurately reflects previous research by Overton (2000) that the overrepresentation seems to typically occur in the non-organic or biological disabilities. Other studies carried out on minority students in special education show that the disproportionate representation is more prevalent in High-incidence disabilities while there seem to be no overrepresentation in the organic category; visible, physical disabilities (Artiles, Trent, & Palmer, 2004; MacMillan, & Reschley, 1998)

This overrepresentation is particularly high in the area of behaviour related disorders and learning disability (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002). In addition, Artiles, Kozleski, Trent, Osher and Ortiz (2010) also concur that African American and American Indian students are over represented in emotional and behaviour disorders, learning disability and mental retardation.

Part of the controversy with high-incidence disabilities is that the assessment process involves a great extent of observation and individual judgement (MacMillan, & Reschley, 1998). Teachers make judgements based on observable symptoms. However, observations are in no doubt subjective and without personal or cultural bias. Consequently, teachers' observations can unavoidably be subject to cultural and other personal biases. Moreover, typically most of these High Incidence disabilities do not require medical testing (Arnold & Lassmann, 2003). According to Arnold and Lassmann, diagnosis of high incidence disabilities often is based on an extensive degree of "professional judgment" as to the determination of disability because there is no standard definition for these high incidence disabilities. Hence "a student can move from one state to another and get over a high incidence diagnosis" (p.232). It is the nature of such disabilities that spark controversies, worries, and doubt that ethnic and visible minority students might inappropriately be placed here (Patterson, 2005; Eads, Arnold, & Tyler, 1995; Arnold & Lassmann, 2003). For example, more minority students being referred to particular groups of disability makes it questionable about the accuracy of these standardized assessments. Are these assessment measures culturally biased? If these assessments are standardized; then there should be equal representation across the board just like in low incident disability. Moreover, a study by Mandell, Davis, Bevans and Guevara (2008) shows that there are ethnic disparities in special education labeling even among children with similar clinical profiles.

With that said, there are some disabilities that are preventable like Fetal Alcohol Spectrum Disorder (FASD) and yet they are still more rampant in minority communities. Fuchs, Burnside, Marchenski, and Mudry (2005) in a study looking at children with disabilities receiving services from child welfare agencies in Manitoba, found that FASD among children from Aboriginal descent was twice as high compared to non aboriginal children. This situation makes one ask the question, why is it that in preventable and non organic cases there seems to be a difference in the proportion of minority students in special education? The difference doesn't seem to be biological and therefore is likely environmental. The subsequent sections discuss this question by examining the participants' responses.

### **Thematic Interpretation**

Themes were drawn out from the interview data according to the interview questions and are presented in this section. The findings match closely to generally established ideas about the factors that contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Skiba

et al. 2005, Losen, 2002, Patton, 1998). Additionally, the reasons given by participants for the overrepresentation of minority students in special education were consistent with the results of the study by McBride and McKee (2001) to the Ministry of Education British Columbia.

The following themes were derived from the analysis of the participants' conversations:

1. Socioeconomic Status (SES),
2. Cultural Differences,
3. Teacher Characteristics,
4. Language,
5. High Transiency,
6. Appropriateness of Assessment methods
7. Impact of History
8. Gender Differences
9. Measures to reduce overrepresentation

The individual themes are discussed later in details in this chapter.

### **Socioeconomic status**

One common theme which kept reoccurring was the issue of poverty. Previous studies have referenced poverty as playing a contributing factor in predisposing minority students into special education (Zhang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Hosp and Reschly 2004; Coutinho, Oswald, & Best, 2002; Oswald, Coutinho, Best & Singh, 1999; Donovan and Cross, 2002; Skiba et al., 2006). Consistent to prior research the findings of this result suggest that socioeconomic status of minority students plays a significant role in minority student being overrepresented in special education. All the participants strongly agreed that minority children's socioeconomic status influence the likelihood of being placed in special education. According to one of the participants "socioeconomic standard has an impact on education and it is being shown to be as large a predictor of a student's achievement as any other single factor" (Rain). Similarly two other participants stated,

Oh, yes it does! Because, let's face it, parents taking time off work to go to the school, even taking the time to get assessments done, putting special things in their homes to support their kids. You can't do that if you don't have a bit of extra income to do it. For my child, who is hyper, the best thing for me to do is keep him in sports because if he's not active he's in trouble. Being in sports in this country is not cheap. You pay a lot of money to play hockey or soccer and not all parents can do that. (Kimba)

And again, a value system where a child is evaluated and pre-judged because they are from a poor family is unfortunate. Many First Nations people are in the poverty group and they automatically think that they have a lower learning level. (Mary)

All the participants shared the view that poverty seems to predispose minority students to the likelihood of needing special education. Similarly other research attest to the detrimental effect of childhood poverty on children's cognitive development and academic outcome putting these kids at risk for special education or which makes them more likely to require special education (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn 1997; Sameroff, 2000; Blaire & Scott, 2002; Lee & Burkam, 2002; Yeung, Linver & Brooks-Gunn, 2002; Gershoff, Aber, Raver, & Lennon, 2007). Currie (2005) in a study looking at health disparities and gaps in school readiness found that children from poor families (lower economic background) had more physical health problems such as obesity and asthma, mental health problems such as depression and anxiety, and behavioural problems such as ADHD and antisocial disorder compared to their middle- or upper-class peers. In the same vein one of the participants commented that "I think that the minority students that we have with the Aboriginal background have so many other issues with poverty that it does really, really impact their social emotional behaviour". (Barb). Even though there are no direct evidence indicating that poverty causes social emotional disorder, the stressors related to poverty can increase the chances of developing emotional and behaviour problems are high.

Moreover, minority communities and therefore children have the highest rate of poverty here in Canada. A National Council of Welfare Reports (2007) on children living in poverty showed evidence that in 2005 minority children had the highest poverty rates for children under 15 years old in Canada. 33% of Immigrant children lived in poverty compared to 12% of Non-immigrant children. Again 28% of Aboriginal children (non-reserve only) were poor compared to 13% Non-Aboriginal children. The report also highlighted that the highest poverty rate was for the group Statistics Canada calls North American Indian (34%), followed by Inuit (21%), Métis (20%) then visible minority children: 26% and Non-visible minority children: 10%. Similarly, Cool (2009) noted that child poverty rates among Aboriginal, immigrant, and visible minority children are more than double that of the average Canadian child. Again, the 2009 Saskatchewan Education Indicators Report revealed that only 15% of non-aboriginal children under the age of six lived in a low income family in Saskatchewan that year, compared to over half (51%) of Aboriginal children of the same age. In addition, the report elucidated that

“community environment, family structure and income level all affect the amount of support and resources available to provide education” (p. 24.). Consequently, high levels of poverty among minority groups influence the amount of support that parents can provide for their kids. Two of the participants observed that

I also know that a lot of minority people, let’s face it, they are not the most well-to-do members of the community. (Kimba).

In low income areas, parents probably don’t have the education, the skills maybe to work with their kids to know that there are a whole multitude of layers of things that can be done in the community or in the school as they are probably working double shifts trying to make ends meet..(Charity)

Kimba and Charity’s observations seem to exemplify the influence of poverty on influencing the amount of support available to minority students’ educational development and hence contributing to the disproportionate number of minority students requiring special education. Linked closely to socioeconomic status were concerns about parental involvement.

**Parental involvement.** Parental involvement was observed to be strongly interconnected with socioeconomic status. All the participants unequivocally associated parental involvement with socio- economic status of the parent. Rain noted that

Socio economic standing also impacts on how the teachers in the school division relates to you. I know for a fact the higher SES, the higher involvement of the parents and the more likely that the parents will support their students and take on school administration, whereas the lower SES tend to not go to that level. So, it has a significant impact.

Rain’s opinion is supported by works such as McIntyre, Eckert, Fiese, DiGennaro and Wildenger (2007) and Lee and Bowe (2006) who found evidence that parental involvement and socioeconomic status of parents are interrelated. These researchers observed that poor parents are less involved in their children's school during kindergarten compared with more affluent parents. Equally important, Jeynes (2003, 2005) and Fan and Chen (2001) found evidence that high levels of family involvement in school are associated with high levels of child achievement. Parental involvement either in the form of helping with homework or attending parent teacher interviews involves time and often parents in low Social Economic background do not have the time or resources to be actively involved in their children’s education. Moreover, Gershoff, Aber, Raver and Lennon (2007) specifically found evidence that parental stress due to material hardship or

low income affected parents' investment in their children and positive parenting behavior, each of which positively correlated with children's cognitive skills and social-emotional competence. In line with this assertion one of the participants also observed that:

So you have two parents working hard and often there isn't the time to go and sit in the child's classroom for hours on end. (Kimba)

Kimba's words suggest there is a link between poverty and a parents' ability to provide and actively be involved in their children's academic development.

Furthermore, socioeconomic status affects school readiness even before students start school. A Statistics Canada (2006) special survey report indicated that children from lower and higher income families differed significantly in all facets (dimensions) of school readiness. Using data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth (NLSCY) to measure the school readiness of Canadian children aged 5 years old in 2002/2003 shown that children from higher income homes had higher scores in receptive vocabulary, communication skill, number knowledge, copying and symbol use. In the same vein, a 15 years longitudinal study by Reynolds, Temple, Robertson and Mann (2001) found evidence that preschool participation was significantly associated with higher school achievement and reduced rates of grade retention and special education services. All these factors predispose minority students from succeeding in the mainstream. This belief resonated with participants' perception where, for example, Ray recounted

Sometimes the families are so overburdened with trying to maintain living standards and houses and things like that that they can't provide that ..... or enriching environment to the children. And a special environment that's conducive to their children doing those kind of mental things that the school wants them to do. So it's all a reflection and it all comes down to the poor student who is seen as a victim of his culture, or his parents and one who has to be replaced or got better and the theme is that they don't want to drag the other students who are ready to move on down, so they place them in a special education.

Barb's words also illustrate this statement when she noted,

Even the lack of exposure to some of the skills that are important for education, Maybe when both minority students as in Aboriginal students or immigrants, they are not familiar with paper and pencils and pencil crayons or going to the library or cutting things out or doing things before they start school, so it's almost like they started at a disadvantage, even sometime the Caucasian students have had pre-school experiences which is something they would have paid for, because they want their child to get ahead, they want them to be socialized, they want them to be already being successful in kindergarten, whereas, the minority students maybe haven't had that kind of exposure,

opportunity, or don't even know that that's something that people can do, because that's not part of their lives, it's not anything that they've even heard of. And if the minority students are already starting a step away from the regular students then it's harder for them to play catch-up for more.

Ray and Barb shared the view that parental involvement is positively correlated with socioeconomic status and seem to affect the parents' ability to provide some of the basic school readiness skills which serves as foundation for later school success thereby placing these students at a disadvantage even before the beginning of school. Unfortunately, there are no specific statistics to show how many minority students participate in preschool programs in Canada (Richards & Scott, 2009). Nevertheless, a study by Ball (2008) revealed that students who went through an Aboriginal head start program had lower rate of grade repetition in elementary school compared with the student who did participate in one. In light of this, a Canadian Policy Research Networks (CPRN) report by Richards and Scott (2009) strongly recommended early childhood education as a necessary program, particularly for children from marginalized communities to help offset some of the disparities in school readiness between minority students and their general peers.

Furthermore, according to Fujiura and Yamaki (2000), a U.S Report to Congress (DOE, 1997) postulated that childhood poverty appear to have implications for special education. The Report stated "As poverty among children has increased in the United States, the number of children with disabilities and receiving special education has also increased" (p. i-20). With that said, it is worthy to not that poverty itself does not necessarily cause a disability or is it a direct predictor for special education placement however, it is the experiences that comes with it that often increase the likelihood for disabilities and special education needs (Richards, Hove & Afolabi, 2008; Skiba, Poloni-Staudinger, Simmons, Feggins-Azziz, & Chung, 2005).

Mary's word illustrate this sensibility as she noted

I think it is the experience that they have. I myself, was raised in a very impoverished home but I loved the lure of books, you can be poor and still visit the library and have the supportive parents or supportive sibling to teach you the reading process. I think that because children are in poverty doesn't always make them designated to special education. It is the experiences that they have in the home, you can be poor but you can still have experiences of going out in the community, going to the library, being exposed to literature, doing homework and maybe having some kind of support at home. And, that's a big factor. However, in most impoverished homes there is a lack of reading material.



Mary acknowledged that even though poverty itself does not cause special education placement or referral, the impact of poverty seem to influence the likelihood of special education. In line with Mary's observation, studies by Suglia, Duarte, Sandel, Wright (2010) and Evans (2006, 2007) illuminate the negative effect of poor housing on children's health and likelihood for special education services. Evans expounded that poor housing conditions can lead to childhood health problems such as low IQ and other socio-emotional problems due to lead poisoning and noise volume (Evans, Wells, & Moch, 2003). Similarly, Suglia, Duarte, Sandel, Wright also found evidence that poor housing is a contributing factor to asthma in children. Furthermore, Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson and Wu (2006) documented that "Exposure to poverty and poverty-related stressors clearly increases the likelihood of referral to special education for many students of color...(pp. 1452). Both Barb and Mary noted these circumstances in their experience.

Oh yes, definitely! Because at my school, none of the children ever bring school supplies, the school fully gives them all the pencils and pens and binders and papers and everything they need but we don't let them take the text books home because they don't come back, so if you look at these children's home-lives, they have the TV but they don't have books, they don't have pencils, they don't have paper, they've never, their idea of homework is very limited, they don't do work outside of school hours. And a lot of it is, that they are so busy worrying about where they are going to sleep, what they are going to eat, whether they are going to be warm over night that they don't have any experience outside of school looking at a book or reading so that the poverty really effects their education because how can they concentrate on learning how to read when their stomach is hurting because they are hungry and the school, my school, gives them breakfast and gives them lunch but it's a long time between 12 o'clock one day and 8 o'clock the next morning not to eat. And that's what happens sometimes. These kids really don't have anything else outside of the school to help equip them, to be ready to be good learners so I think that if they do not have enough to eat, they can't be good students. (Barb)

Once again, being a minority, being poor, being in special education, lack of experience, lack of family support and that the family sends the child to the school because they have to - it's the law - and yet that child probably gets up on their own, goes to school on their own and hopefully they get fed at school because a lot of these children probably depend on the school for nutrition as well and they have that lack of support at home so if they have that lack of support, they have no experiences to carry them and build themselves as a student. And that's why they fall in that learning process as well. (Mary)

Barb and Mary identified that living in poverty can hinder minority students from succeeding in the mainstream, and make them more vulnerable to special education. Several studies support the participants' perception in this regard and have found that children who live in poverty

scored significantly lower than middle- and upper-class children on measures of math and reading achievement (Gershoff et al, 2007; Lee & Burkam 2002) and had more behavior problems (Qi, & Kaiser, 2003; Slopen, Fitzmaurice, Williams, & Gilman, 2010).

The significance of poverty seems to be filtered through family processes in how the parents relate to the child and the overall family dynamics (Evans, Boxhill & Pinkava, 2008; Bradley & Corwyn, 2003; Magnuson & Duncan, 2002). McLloyd (1998) noted that parents from lower socioeconomic status exhibited more negative parenting styles. In line with the above, Laureau (2003) posited that social class makes a significant difference in the routines of children's daily lives. Lareau distinguished between how socioeconomic status affects child rearing and parental involvement (styles) between the poor or working class and the middle and upper class. She observed that

The white and black middle class parents actively fostered and assessed their children's talents, opinions and skills and scheduled their children for activities around this goal by making deliberate and sustained effort to stimulate their children's development and to cultivate their cognitive and social skills (p.238).

She called parenting style in the middle to upper class as "concerted cultivation".

While on the other hand, parents from lower socioeconomic status "viewed children's development as unfolding spontaneously; as long as children were provided with comfort, food, shelter, and other basic needs" (p.238). Laureau called this parenting style the "accomplishment of natural growth".

This view was also shared by Mary as she notes

we all know that in homes where children are higher level thinkers they are exposed to higher level language processes at home where they are involved in discussions, they are spoken to, they are involved in the adult world, they read and perhaps T.V. and media is really supervised in the home. Where, in an impoverished home, that child may be spending the next 5 hours after school on the Nintendo or X-box instead of reading a book or doing homework and maybe the only sentence they were told was get off the machine and that's all they heard from the adult in the house. So I think it's really the parents need to know that they need to talk to the children and really expose the language but I mean a lot of impoverished groups they have limited language themselves so the children are not exposed to higher level language achievement and sentence building and conversational tools so they really lack all that from the parents as well.

Cookson Jr. (2006) concurred that class socialization does not only shape our behaviour and language but ultimately our thought and the metaphors by which we make meaning of life.

Consequently, a child raised in poverty with its associated risk factors such as broken family,

poor housing, bad neighbourhood etc., has a higher chance of ending up in special education.

Charity notes this reality in her experience as she relates,

I'm beginning to realize how low income areas generate their own layers of socialized behaviours that end up with young girls being victimized; boys being over aggressive that there is very little for them to do and there is no activities for them to develop their learning spirit to help them define their values within a different context than just going to school, which is always hierarchical. Sports and other social events help people develop relationships that are more lateral but if they don't have the monies to do that then all they have are the hierarchical relationships that are evident in the schools, which are very abusive.

Evans, Gonnella, Marcynyszyn, Gentile, and Salpekar (2005) concurred that poverty is associated with higher rates of socio-emotional problems in children and youth, higher school drop-out rates, increased health care needs and increase rate in crime (Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Duncan, Brooks-Gunn, & Klebanov, 1994; Evans and English, 2002; MacEwen & Saulnier, 2010), which all serve to impede minority students' cognitive and academic outcome and increase their likelihood of requiring special education services. To this end, MacMillan and Reschly (1998) stated that

We are willing to argue that in such a matrix, the inter-correlation between ethnicity and social class would be moderately high and that social class, and not ethnicity, would explain more variance in the rates of detection for these high-incidence disabilities, particularly MMR. (p. 20)

In line with this assertion, Harry, Klingner, Sturges, and Moore (2002) and Wagner (1995) argue that a student's socioeconomic status is a stronger determinant than race in accounting for the overrepresentation of minority students into special education. Moreover, Levin (2001) also asserted that, "family background continues to be the single most important predictor of educational and life outcomes" (p. 31). In line with the above, the participants all expressed the same belief that minority students' family socioeconomic status play an important role in their educational success. Ray noted that "It always filters back to the parent's economic status and how much they have to struggle to get everything done". Similarly Betty's words echoed the sentiments of most participants as she said,

Absolutely! In many ways I think the two factors, one is bad but when you put them together it is like extremely, extremely terrible. It's extremely bad, it's like a ball and chain around your neck twice. It has twice the weight on your ability to be empowered. I had a friend, she adopted a child from the Caribbean and she asked some people in good positions with education and community, like, (they were looking at) social work and

different educators, what is possibly the best thing I can do for my child? And she said move into a rich area and look like you have money at all times. Look like you have money that is the best thing you can do for your child. And I thought that to me that really spoke volumes because we have marginalized individuals in the community that I'm in right now, whom aren't even immigrants and there is such a stigma and a label to them and it's not really their fault that they come to school without the proper food or clothing. It's other issues and parenting issues and social issues and can you imagine that coupled with not knowing the language; or the culture here and having a label and looking different, which an immigrant student would be facing on top of all the rest and the isolation of not communicating with another peer with your language or your common background?

These two comments indicate that socioeconomic status does play a crucial role in contributing to minority students ending up in special education. In the same vein, Kieffer (2010) in a study investigating the prevalence of "late-emerging" reading difficulties among English language learners (ELLs) and native English speakers from different socioeconomic backgrounds found that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds and ELLs students were at a significantly elevated risk for late-emerging reading difficulties. Additionally, both ELLs and non-ELLs from similar socioeconomic backgrounds were at similar risk implying that socioeconomic status of students especially minority students does play a contributing factor for their referral into special education.

### **Cultural differences**

Cultural differences between the school and minority communities were also identified as contributing to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Many studies have documented the effect of cultural difference on minority students' education (Howard, 2008, Gonzales, Moll & Amanti, 2005, Lynn & Parker, 2006, Yosso, 2005). Clarke (1994) lamented that the biggest challenges facing culturally and linguistically diverse learners is that the current school system is an Euro-centric school system which is primarily designed to support students who have English as their first language, thereby putting other cultural minority students especially English as an Additional Language (EAL) students at risk for failure. Consequently there is a marked cultural gap between the school and minority students putting them at risk for school failure.

Participants' perceptions were consistent with much of the previous research that cultural difference influences minority students being over represented in special education. This can be seen in a variety of statements made by participants.

Yes, because schools have an expected response from students, and if, for whatever reason the student's culture doesn't support that, then the child is going to be looked upon as having deficits because they're not responding the same way as everybody else. (Rain)

I do! (emphatically) What might be tolerated at home may not be tolerated at school. (Tamara)

Participants' words suggested they were very passionate about the school perceiving minority students' cultural difference as deficit. They bemoaned that the deficit mentality held by educators towards minority people goes a long way to hinder and contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students into special education. One participant commented that

It's again, if you have not yet had a chance to unpack your own cultural lens and ideologies and to see that lens as being not just a lens but ideologies created from where you were raised by which you operate from, you assume that that is normal and unquestionable. Unpacking the cultural lens is valuable in that you see that your beliefs and values and things you think are facts are culturally constructed and reinforced. When you are among those who think like you, it feels normal. But when you learn different facts, different cultural norms, then you can be at least open to different explanations for student behaviours and characteristics in a very diverse population. Not everyone will have that same foundation and I think that Euro-centric privilege still animates throughout education systems as how normal is defined. And so special ed is really the abnormal being normed and if you are a normed group and everything you are is part of your norms, everything that is outside your norms then becomes a target for what might be called special, or different or unique...but when you are in a school where difference leads to not speaking in the normed way or acting in the normed way, or believing and having attitudes that belong to the normed way then these are marked as other or different, and that marking of the other is really a marking of another as deficient and inferior, and the self as superior. (Charity)

Charity's observation reflects the need for culturally sensitivity in identifying minority students for special education programs. Similarly, Banks (2006) and Ming and Dukes (2006) both emphasized the importance and benefits of culturally competent teachers on the success of minority students' educational outcome (Ladson Billings, 1994, 2000; Ford & Whiting (2007).

In the same vein, Sleeter (2008) concurred that

Classrooms in which students, teacher, and texts are rooted in a similar cultural context are likely to activate knowledge students bring, regardless of whether or not the teacher specifically plans for this. But classrooms in which students' cultural context is different from that of the teacher and/or texts do not necessarily do so unless the teacher deliberately accesses students' knowledge to link it with academics (pg. 214)

Again all the participants with the exception of Mary strongly emphasized that teachers'

cultural knowledge does play a factor in the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. However, Barb had a different view about the importance of teachers' cultural knowledge influencing students. She thought that it was not as important a factor because she believes teachers can learn on the job. "It's something you can learn as you go" (Barb).

However, Mary disagreed noting that

We have a lot of beginning teachers who are learning as they go and who are hurting at the end. The child who is designated for special education; it is another barrier for them because of the teacher's lack of experience.

Mary's words are reflected in the implication of Sleeter (2008) study, that there is the need for teachers to be culturally responsive before getting into the classroom.

**Misunderstanding of children's background.** The need for culturally responsive teachers was shared by all the participants even though its urgency was not shared equally among all the participants. Most participants strongly agreed that teachers' cultural background is a strong factor in the overrepresentation of minority students in special education, and that teachers' ignorance of the cultural background of minority students influence referral because they believe teachers often misunderstand and misinterpreted minority students' actions, thoughts and behaviour.

Some examples of this was shared by Rain and Kimba who noted,

Well, the culture clash, for one thing. I mean, it's just big because one of the problems that we're having, and I mean, the Province is struggling to work on it but, I mean, it's still, if your own culture, and it doesn't matter whether you're from Trinidad or from Pelican Narrows, if your culture is not respected, then it creates issues. How the teacher interprets what you're doing in the classroom again, I mean, there could be things that you're doing that are completely in tune with your culture, but if they're not acceptable, for the way the schools are structured here. Styles of learning are really an important thing and with different cultures they stress different, importance of different things and they may not necessarily match up with the curriculum (Rain).

The participants' observations resonated with Weinstein et al.'s (2004) findings that noted that novice white teachers reported that they often perceived lively debates between African American males as suggestive of aggressive behaviours, when in fact among the African American males they simply perceived their engagements to be merely culturally expressive communication. Banks (2006) postulates that lack of cultural awareness and appreciation might lead to misunderstanding of cultural differences towards minority students with regard to

learning, communication, and behavioural styles.

Ray added that

They're, unfortunately, burdened with a lot of things as teachers, but none of them are really taught to understand trans-cultural personalities. Different cultures value different ways of transmitting knowledge and acting. (If) the teacher doesn't understand that, then, those will be seen as deficient behaviours instead of just behaviours developed from a community of kinship and family unit and they are loud or they're silent, they have different ways of behaving and if the teacher tells them that their ways of behaviour and being is wrong, then that's gonna effect everything about the students.

Ray's comment suggests that cultural differences can sometimes lead to misunderstanding between teachers and students. Again, cultural difference can influence how a teacher perceives minority students' attitude and behaviour. In agreement with Ray and Charity, Sleeter (2008) observed that many White pre-service teachers have deficit views and lower expectations for students of color. Additionally, misunderstanding of cultural differences between educators and students can contribute to low teacher expectations of students, poor student- teacher relationships, misinterpretation of behaviours, and other adverse effects on the students' self concept (Ford, 1996). Cultural difference is a vital issue in the classroom because culture is a part of an individual's identity, and therefore influences how one perceives others and how others perceive us. Consequently, if minority students' culture is seen as a deficit then it is going to affect their identity and perception of minority students. A vivid example is seen in Betty's statement.

Oh, this is horrible. I feel this every time I walk into a resource room classroom. It's the stigma; the labelling: I'm dumb, I have a label, it's not bad enough that I look different or sound different or have different ideas but now I'm dumb, I have no brain, no intellect. I'm seen as the odd one, the weird one, and I stand out. And for students especially in the teen area, they start to hate themselves, they start to hate their parents they start to hate their heritage because everything is so negative around them when they walk into the school or when they are in the building and they feel so marginalized and even the basis of what they know isn't respected and even for trying they are put in a classroom where perhaps they see children with actual physical, emotional, mental disabilities and now they are starting to identify themselves with that and it's very, very sad.

In line with Betty's statement, various studies argue that it is very important that teachers be both academically qualified and culturally competent (Sleeter, 2008; Thompson, 2004; Gay, 2000) in order to develop competent students, who are both academically successful and cultural confident in their identity. According to Murrell (2001) it is very important that teachers

understand, and be familiar with the background and community of their students in order to effectively teach them. He posits that it is essential that teachers have an understanding of the “lived experiences, cultural knowledge, and political sensibilities of the cultural communities in which they teach”. (p. 55).

Despite all the resources about the importance of cultural responsive teaching, one of the biggest challenges hindering teachers from being culturally responsive is the notion of colour blindness. Colour blindness or cultural blindness, as referred to by Ford and Whiting (2008), is when teachers believe they are cultural or racially neutral. Educators who believe in this philosophy argue that culture or race makes no difference and that all children are the same (Ford & Whiting, 2008; Sleeter, 2008). As a result, such teachers practise “a one size fit all model” where they fail to adapt their teaching and classroom to be culturally responsive, and ignore the strength that might be unique to minority students (Ford & Grantham, 2003).

This philosophy prevents teachers from dealing with their biases or seeking to understand the context and needs of minority students but instead shift the blame for their ineffectiveness to engage minority students on the students. In such cases the students become the victims of his or her culture and background (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges III & Jennings, 2010; Ford, 1996).

In addition, Ford and Whiting (2008) noted that colour / culture blind mentality plays a part in the unwillingness of educators to consider alternative assessment in assessing the strength of minority students in the gifted category or before referring students for special education services. Evans (2007) argues that in order to address the needs of racially and linguistically minority students, educators must eschew color blindness, “see” and acknowledge race, and the different sociopolitical manifestations of racism, and recognize their own (or a group’s) dominance and marginalization of others (p. 141). Moreover, a study conducted by Evans revealed that to a varying degree, educators’ understanding and perceptions about race influence their willingness to challenge or change status quo social structures within their schools.

In the light of the above, it is vital that teachers undertake self-reflection and understand or discover their own racial position and privilege in respect to the different racial and cultural representations in their classroom. Self-reflection in this sense involves thoroughly analyzing and carefully evaluating both personal beliefs and instructional behaviours about the value of the different cultural diversity present in the classroom (Gay & Kirkland, 2003).



**Misconceptions of cultural acceptance.** The participants also expressed some misconceptions of cultural acceptance exhibited by the school. The participants expressed their displeasure that it is not enough to just celebrate only different aspects of minority culture and not accept or appreciate the totality of the culture. A study by Mueller and O'Connor (2007) affirmed the participants' belief that lots of teachers predominantly white teachers, come to the classroom with a false understanding of multiculturalism. Similarly, the participants offered the following comments:

Charity commented

In those instances some of that uniqueness is thought to be a great asset – when it is a beautiful picture that you paint that comes from a particular perspective or a dance that is different but very beautiful and harmonious and very balanced or is in terms of assets of food and culture that are brought in to be put side by side with all kinds of different groups like we do at the folk festival, it is a beautiful and harmonious thing but when you are in a school where difference leads to not speaking in the normed way or acting in the normed way, or believing and having attitudes that belong to the normed way then these are marked as other, different, and that marking of other is really a marking of other as deficient and inferior, and the self as superior. (Charity)

Kimba expressed the same idea, stating,

I think teachers need to get diversity training. Let's face it, Saskatchewan is bringing in a lot of newcomers and the schools are going to be full of minority kids and teachers need to understand these cultures. And you don't learn about other people's cultures by watching television or going to Folkfest, or going to a powwow. I think teachers really need to have a program. Changing the curriculum of teacher's colleges would be a bit of a stretch but I think there has to be a training that really gets teachers to understand the different cultures and the many backgrounds of the many kids that are coming into school these days. I think that's what's needed.

Again, Tamara also expressed this sentiment.

Not knowing if they will ever allow themselves to understand our family because they don't know where we come from because all the staff we've been involved with have all been non-minority nor was there ever really a movement to make sure that there was some sign that we were accepted for the background that we come from unless they wanted representation from us so that the school looks culturally sensitive. ..The following week after Brendon was suspended, he was invited to speak his Native language at an assembly. ...So he's more than welcome to be himself in culturally festive events but when it comes to school and schoolwork and sitting in the classroom he can't be himself.

In effect, these comments express the view that cultural acceptance goes beyond accepting diverse cultural food, dance and festivals. These activities are part of the culture but what minority people are looking for is acceptance of who they are as people, and as individuals. What participants' perceptions indicate is that minority people want respect for their knowledge and respect for their way of life, and not "selected acceptance", where a cultural group is only celebrated during one week of the year, and the rest of the year one's language and culture is seen as a deficit.

### **Teacher Characteristics**

Teachers play a "critical role" in the identification, management and success of children with and without exceptionalities in the classroom (Rivard, Missiuna, Hanna & Wishart, 2007, p. 645). This role is of special importance because teachers are usually the first people to make a referral (Whiting & Ford, 2009). Many researchers indicate that a child's ethnicity or culture influences the likelihood of being identified and referred by a teacher into special education especially in the gifted programs (McBee, 2006; Milner & Ford, 2007; Sternberg, 2007; Plata & Masten, 1998). A study conducted by Elhoweris, Mutua, Alsheikh, and Holloway (2005) investigated the effects of students' ethnicity on teachers' decision making of gifted students proved that a child's ethnicity impacted teacher referrals. Furthermore, minority students who are fortunate enough to have been placed in the gifted programs, still experienced some form of discrimination in these programs. For example the students mentioned discriminatory school policies as an issue, while others stated that they "did not feel accepted by their White teachers and White students, both of whom made disparaging comments to them about their ethnicity" (Shaunessy, McHatton, Hughes, Brice, & Ratliff, 2007, p. 179). Ford (2010) lamented that most often teachers have pre conceived deficit mentality of minority students and are therefore unintentionally blinded by this misconception as they relate to minority students. Ford stated that

First, deficit thinking is grounded in the belief that culturally different students are genetically and culturally inferior to White students. It is a belief that their culture – beliefs, values, language, practices, customs, traditions, and more – is problematic, substandard, inferior, abnormal, and unacceptable "(pg 32).

As a result some educators do not focus on the strengths and potential of racial minority students; instead they may be blinded by low expectations and negative stereotypes they hold about minority students. Consequently the participants were asked about their perception of

teacher characteristics influencing or contributing to the overrepresentation of minority students into special education. Consistent with previous research, all the participants strongly agreed that teacher characteristics play a big role in minority students being referred for special education. Acknowledgement of such realities seems evident with participants for example as Ray and Tamara noted

About 90 per cent is all teacher behaviour, culture, understanding the knowledge, transmission of self-esteem to children. (Long pause) They're, unfortunately, burdened with a lot of things as teachers, but none of them are really taught to understand trans-cultural personalities. Different cultures value different ways of transmitting knowledge and acting. The teacher doesn't understand that, then, those will be seen as deficient behaviours instead of just behaviours developed from a community of kinship and family unit and they are loud or they're silent, they have different ways of behaving and if the teacher tells them that their ways of behaviour and being is wrong, then that's gonna affect everything about the students. (Ray)

I do. And that was the part that left me conflicted about whether or not to tell his kindergarten teacher some things about Brendon (her son's name) that I thought ..... would influence that way she deals with him. (Tamara)

Ray and Tamara shared the view that teachers' perceptions, attitude and characteristics influence who is placed in special education. In the same vein, Irvine (1985) supports the participants' opinion that teacher's perception of minority students' behavior heavily influenced how they rated these students academically. Irvine's study, he found that teachers had more negative comments about Black male students' behavior than they did about Caucasian students. Similarly, Ferguson (2003) noted that "taking unconditional racial neutrality as the benchmark, it is clear that teachers' perceptions and expectations are biased in favor of Whites and that teacher behaviors appear less supportive of Blacks (p. 494). Strayhorn (2008) in a study also found that 20% of Black male students reported feeling put down by their teachers in class compared to 4% of White men and 4.8% of Black women. This idea is reflected in Ray's words that "Students are so sensitive and fragile and it's not the casebook ever and everything they have to read, it's the teachers' attitude, how the teacher empowers them that makes all the difference in the world to me".

Different studies have shown that teacher effect (attitude, characteristics and perception) does play a role in students' academic achievement (Darling Hammond, 2000; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Presley, White, & Gong, 2005). Five-time award winning children's book author, Dr. Christopher Paul Curtis in an interview with the university of

Windsor Education publication mentioned that her grade three teacher made a difference in his life which directly motivated his creative writing talent. He said “the main thing she did was to provide me with encouragement; she made me feel special, and that really mattered... she told me I was room C Citizen of the Day’ and she put a gold star on my forehead.” Dr. Curtis is a clear example of the influence of teacher characterises on a minority student. In the same way negative actions also goes a long way to damage minority students’ lives. Again Jussim and Harber (2005) found that teachers’ self fulfilling prophecies do occur in the classroom, and tend to have more effect on minority students’ outcome than non minority students. This could partly be explained that perhaps because majority of minority students live in poverty, they have more issues to deal with and therefore can easily be discouraged by a teachers’ negative attitude.

Noguera (2007) strongly believes that an effective teacher is the most consistently found factor influencing the achievement and motivation of students of colour, is teacher efficacy (p. 45). Sleeter (2007) and Ferguson (2003), agree with this suggesting that teacher effect influence minority students’ school achievements. A study by Jussim, Eccles, and Madon (1996) and Muller, Katz and Dance (1999) both concluded that teachers’ low expectation of minority students resulted in low outcomes of minority students while teachers who had positive perceptions of their students’ abilities produced higher outcomes.

Mary recounted that

In my years of schooling as well, no one ever told me I need to go to university, I need to train myself after grade 12, that wasn’t even in my option, it wasn’t even in my language that wasn’t in the actions of our family and I remember in grade 11, my biology teacher said, you know, you need to go to university, (Mary)we don’t have enough Indians in university and that was a first time anybody ever put a thought process into my head about the possibility of training myself after high school. And plus, with the low self-esteem, I thought I didn’t have it in me academically, I thought I was a no-good dumb Indian and I thought, what would I be doing in university? I wouldn’t be able to complete what was expected of me at the university level and I look at the students that are in the schools now, the First Nations students, and I wonder how many educators really guide the minority students and First Nations students to plan for a future, to plan for future goals and to talk about the process of post secondary training or training in adult courses of any kind, .... ?

Mary’s experience exemplifies a good example of the influence of teacher characteristics. Mary was able to go on to the university and accomplish a lot of great things because of a teacher who had an open mind and had high expectation for minority students as well.

This aligns with, Jordan, Schwartz and McGhie- Richmond (2009) assertion that teachers' beliefs about the nature of disability, and about their roles and responsibilities in working with students with special education needs influence their instructional method and inadvertently affect student's outcome. According to Hornstra, Denessen, Bakker, Van den Bergh and Voeten (2010)

Biased teacher perceptions of students can affect just how teachers interact with their students and also can influence the curricular and instructional opportunities offered to students, which may then-in- turn affect the academic achievement of students (pg 516).

A clear example of this is seen in Kimba's story,

I find that sometimes it's easy for teachers to put a child in a special ed. group rather than deal with a special way of teaching. I have been a teacher before and I know it takes a lot of work to have almost- like- a different program for different kids but the thing is, we all don't learn the same kind of way so there has to be an effort on the part of the teacher. I'm not saying that all teachers don't know how to deal with kids with special needs. In my child's schooling, he's had one teacher who, she knew what the child was capable of and challenged him and went the extra mile and he excelled in her class where as other teachers just were, oh well you' re disruptive, you'er this and that go to this room ... never really were able to engage him and he never did well in their class. Not because he wasn't capable, he was very smart; it was just that the environment did not permit that.

Brophy and Good (1974) share a view to Kimba suggesting that teachers' perception of students' influences how they interact and support students in the classroom. They noted that in middle class white schools, a student's inattention was taken as an indication of the teacher's need to arouse the student interest, but the same behavior in a lower class black school was explained as boredom due to the student's limited attention span. Brophy and Good also found that teachers in a lower class black school generally had low expectations for the students and low respect for their ability to learn (from Leacock as cited in Brophy & Good, 1974, p. 10). Furthermore, others such as Furgerson (2003) explained that because teachers perceive that minority students have less potential, teachers probably search with less conviction than they should for ways to help minority students improve their academic achievement than they would if they were white students or perceived as having equal abilities.

A clear illustration is given by Barb when asked if teachers' perceptions and attitude affect minority students being placed in special education.

I don't want to say that they are biased, but if teachers are familiar with families and perhaps know that the parent doesn't have good parenting skills, they have already created a pre-

conceived conception of what the students will be like. May be once in a while there is a student that may excel despite the limitations that they have in their home life but usually it's that the student is functioning the best they can given the environment they are in....

Again, several studies have documented the effect of teacher characteristics on student achievement (Presley, White & Gong 2005; Nye, Konstantopoulos, & Hedges, 2004; Rivkin, Hanushek, & Kain, 2005; Murnane, & Phillips, 1981; Konstantopoulos, 2009). Teacher characteristics cover a whole lot of qualities (McKinney, Fuller, Hancock & Audette, 2006; Haberman, 1995; Brown, Morehead, & Smith, 2008; Walls, Nardi, Von Minden, & Hoffman, 2002; Danielewicz, 2001; Connelly & Clandinin, 1999). Teacher characteristics may be influenced by different factors such as gender, qualification, age, religion, classroom management skills and individual life experience and a whole lot of other personal factors.

However, one of the factors least studied or observed but nevertheless plays a big role in the way teachers interact with minority kids is teachers' self awareness. Villegas and Lucas (2002) believe that teacher self-reflection is an important part of teacher characteristics that influence how teacher interact with minority students. Richards, Brown and Forde (2007) also suggest that teacher's self-reflection is vital because teachers' personal values impact his or her relationships with the students and their families; therefore, teachers must reconcile any negative feelings and perceptions that they might hold towards any cultural, language, or ethnic group in order for them to be effective with minority students. Richards, Brown, and Forde expressed that many times teachers are resistant to the notion that their values might reflect prejudices or even racism towards certain groups. However, it is imperative that teachers rid themselves of such biases before they can create an atmosphere of trust and acceptance for students and their families, and consequently create an opportunity for minority students to success. A clear example of such bias is given by Tamara

I do know that when I was interning the 6 or 7 minority students that I knew had their own T.A. (teaching assistant) or were dealt an exceptional situation, it was like they were scared to interact with the parents because they were minority. They had less conversation with the parents and that maybe because they are fearful to call or they assume they won't come or may be the parent can't come or is too fearful of the school system to be an affront.

Tamara expressed the belief that teachers sometimes relate differently towards minority students based on certain preconceived ideas about minority communities which hinders teachers from objectively or actively supporting minority students. Aligning with Tamara's opinion, Evans

(2007) concurred that teachers need to confront their personal values and biases in order to help minority students succeed. Castagno and Brayboy (2008) echoed that teachers who are culturally competent have the ability to engage and successfully teach students from different cultures while enabling the students to develop cultural competence and pride in their own culture (Ladson Billings, 2000; Gay, 2000).

Moreover, several studies have noted the importance of healthy, positive student teacher relationship to minority students' achievement (Gay, 2000; Brophy & Good, 1974; Noddings, 2005; Hughes & Kwok, 2007; Wu, Hughes & Kwok, 2010). Consistent with the above research, all the participants strongly agreed that teacher student relationship plays a major role in minority students' performance.

All the participants agreed that student-teacher relationship played a very important role in influencing minority students into special education and student's overall success in the school.

According to Rain,

“ really what that comes down is the ability of the teacher to build a relationship with that student. ...it's the ability to build that relationship and that trust with them. (Rain)

He went further to explain that

.. behaviour is always tricky, children that are disruptive, the teachers want them out. ... But, a lot of that has to do with the relationship between the student and the teacher. I mean, it's a very big point, because you can have students that are very disruptive in one class and then the next class they're not. So, is it child behaviour or not?

Similarly, Barb also gave a personal example to explain the importance of student teacher relation.

I had a student who was playing hockey and even though it was my evening and my free time, I went to watch some of his hockey games, and he remembered that forever. He would say, you remember when you came and watched me play hockey. That kind of relationship piece outside of the classroom is always nice too. That both the student can see the teacher as a person and the teacher can see the student as a person. That even though this “little Sally” has problems with reading and math, she is a wonderful figure skater and she can do so much out there that you see a different aspect and I think it's important to see them as a whole person. Within the classroom it's a little harder, when you have twenty little ones all wanting your attention but even then take turns focussing on different students so you get to know them more as a person (Barb).

The respondents' experiences and observations indicate that teacher student relationship is very important and plays a role in minority students' education. Teacher student relationship is

built on trust (Brown, 2005) and genuine care about students (Holiday, 2005). Holliday (2005) stressed on the importance of human connection in the classroom. She asserted that to motivate different types of learners requires talent, creativity, and well-prepared teachers who sincerely cared about their students.

Furthermore, effective communication is paramount to creating an environment of mutual respect between students and teachers where each party feels respected and accepted for what they have to offer in the learning process (Brown, 2005). Hence it is very important that teachers build healthy trusting relationship with their students as a favorable foundation for learning and growing experience for students.

### **Language Barriers**

Language barriers were also viewed as one of the reasons for the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education services. All the participants identified language as an important determinant for the over representation of linguistic minority students in special education. Studies have documented that culturally and linguistic minority students are often overrepresented in special education particularly in the high incidence disability and underrepresented in the gifted programs (Coutinho & Oswald, 2004; Artiles & Trent, 1997; Obiakor, 2007; Delgado & Rogers-Adkinson, 1999; Samson & Lesaux, 2009; Ford & Whiting, 2007). Rain, Ray and Charity all noted this reality.

Well, one of the things that comes up, and this may be the same for other minority students, is, if English isn't their primary language, I know I like to harp on this a lot, but, First Nations are the only children who, it's not celebrated if they're bilingual, if they know First Nations and English. Instead of saying that they're bilingual, they immediately slap the ESL or some other similar type of label on them and make it look like it's a deficit. I mean, if a child came in to Saskatoon and spoke only French, they wouldn't put that child in Special Ed, but if he comes in speaking Cree, there's a good chance that's where he's going to end up. (Rain)

Well, I think that's the key determinant. ... If they come here as children it's perceived that, very quickly, that they should go into special education based on linguistic backgrounds. If they're from, any kind of deviation from Ukrainian or European cultures, they're immediately suspected as needing special education, (Ray)

When students have an Aboriginal-English dialect that they come into the school with, teachers might assume then that they have lesser cognitive abilities when in fact it is simply a dialect version of their home and community and that they are quite brilliant in the way in which they are able to capture all kinds of nuances and absorb material and so on. (Charity)



The above comments indicate that language difference can contribute likely to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Artiles and Ortiz (2002) noted that delays in reading among minority students are often confused with a disability.

An example is seen in Mary's case

I needed a lot of help reading and at that time I was raised by my grandmother for the majority of the time I was at home and she was a fluent French speaker so I had this kind of a language stuck between Michief like a little bit of Cree, a little bit English, a little French and they didn't take that into consideration when I was reading the Dick and Jane series. So it took me a few years to master the level of English so I had a really hard start in elementary level (Mary).

Rain provides further insight saying,

And, you know, for all you know, the child can speak three languages. So, I mean, there's all sorts of background that needs to be looked at. And, so, I mean, the child speaks three languages and so we're having some issues with reading, in one particular language. I mean, yeah, there's issues there but I mean, obviously if they can speak three languages, they have the potential so it's the instruction that needs to be modified. (Rain)

Consistent with the views of the participants, Clarke (1994) noted "different" is sometimes mistakenly interpreted as meaning 'deficient,' and ESL students are often unnecessarily referred to special education for assessment (p. 8). Other studies also suggest that the school system is designed in a way that systematically marginalize and only seeks to highlight what minority students lack without regarding the "cultural wealth" that minority students bring to the learning experience (Lynn, Bacon, Totten, Bridges III & Jennings, 2010; Howard, 2008; Lynn & Parker, 2006; Yosso, 2005).

Furthermore, researchers have found evidence pointing to the fact that bilingual babies have an increased sensitivity to a greater range of phonetic contrasts, and an extended developmental window of sensitivity for perceiving phonetic contrast compared with monolinguals, which implies that when children are encouraged to practise in both languages they have the ability to become better readers (Norton, Baker & Petitto, 2003; Petitto, 2009).

Moreover, research support the benefits of first language development in second language acquisition and reading (Collier, 1992, 1995; Cummins, 1981, 1991; Tabors, 1997). Clarke (1994) concurred that "continued first-language development is related to superior scholastic achievement" (p.184). However, the present school system does not seem to capture

the importance of building on minority students' native first languages. Teachers often view linguistic minority students' native languages as deficit instead of viewing them as a good foundation to build on. To this end, one of the participants expressed concern about the fact that minority languages are seen as a deficit. She also expressed the need for language continuance in minority students' use of first language in improving students' reading and academic success.

Charity explained that:

for example when I worked with children in Tree School where my office sat beside the special ed. teacher's room and I heard her work with these children and it occurred to me at the time, that children who were Mikmaq speakers were having difficulty with literacy, language and any other kind of English growth, whether it's in math as well, that it seemed odd to me that they should give somebody just more of the same in another closed, controlled situation rather than giving them something different. And I would say something different might have been if they had brought in a Mi'kmaq speaking specialist who would work with the student in their primary language to see whether or not they in fact had a problem with the math, or whether it was the language and the conceptual understanding that they had of the math, or of the stories and so on or whether in fact they had a conceptual deficit, if you could use that word, and then would need to have something different. It seemed odd to me that they would be given more of the same English instruction in a controlled setting and not something very different... but again, it also occurred to me that it just seemed odd that they would be given an English speaking special ed teacher to teach them and that they really needed someone with their own language skills so I just couldn't fathom how they could really build the language growth that they needed to without the teacher having the same language as the students.

In line with Charity's comment, Pérez & Torres-Guzmán (1996) observed that "Children who develop proficiency in using their native language to communicate, to gain information, to solve problems, and to think can easily learn to use a second language in similar ways" (p. 96). Thus, it is important that schools encourage native language growth as foundation for developing minority students' reading and overall academic success for minority student. Jhingran (2009) also noted that

Language is not merely a means of communication. Language, thinking and learning are inextricably linked. When children are forced to study through a language they cannot fully understand in the early primary grades, they face a serious learning disadvantage that can stunt their cognitive development and adversely affect their self-esteem and self-confidence for life. This is especially severe in deprived socioeconomic situations where there is little exposure to the school language outside of school. This is further exacerbated when the children's culture, along with their language, is completely excluded from the classroom. -Dhir Jhingran, 2009, p. 263.

Language plays other roles apart from learning to read because it serves as a foundation for future cognitive and social development (Lindfors, 1991). Salend, Garrick Duhaney and Montgomery (2002) also illustrated that when students are unsure whether it is acceptable for them to express their points of view or their understanding of materials in their first language, they speak less and struggle to find the appropriate words to use in their efforts to communicate with their teachers, which is then perceived as a cognitive disability and can result in their being referred for placement in special education.

Equally important, Reyhner and Singh (2010) also emphasised the need for schools to be encouraging and supportive of different minority languages. They suggest there is a strong link between freedom of language and basic human right. They argue that denial of different languages in schools is a denial of basic human rights to these individuals. Therefore, it is important that schools recognize both languages as important. Furthermore, when schools support and focus on only the English language, it gives the children the impression that different languages and cultures are not valued, which can result in other problems for minority children and minority communities as a whole.

Similarly, this idea is expressed in the Royal Commission on Aboriginal people (Government of Canada, 1996). It outlines that Aboriginal people want two things from education: They want schools to help children, youth and adults learn the skills they need to fully participate in the economy. Secondly, Aboriginal people want schools to help children develop fully as citizens of Aboriginal nations with the knowledge of their languages and traditions necessary for cultural continuity (p. 82).

The report also goes on to say that current school systems do not seem to be accomplishing this given that many Aboriginal people leave school without the necessary credentials for jobs in the mainstream economy or grounding in their languages and cultures. Ladson-Billings (1995) also emphasizes that the goal of schools should not be to just train students to succeed in the mainstream but also to help students build in themselves a sense of pride in their own culture. Similarly Rain reveals this reality as he shared that

I know the governments are pushing more and more that education is about employment, but education has never been about just employment. Education has always been society's way of transferring their culture, from the existing to the children. And so, if minorities are not allowed to do that, if they're forced to fit into the mainstream, I mean, it's going to create issues, even just issues between the home and the student. ....But, I mean, if the school system thinks that it's their job is achievement, math, science,

reading, only, then I think there's going to be issues, because that culture has to be there and it has to be the respect for all the different cultures.

Rain's comment implies that language plays other important role such as affirming one's culture, and building of the one's cultural identity. Thus it is important for schools to support other languages in order to reflect the diversity in the community and the country as a whole.

### **High Transiency**

Another factor identified as contributing to the over representation of minority students is high transiency. Over half of the participants repeatedly identified high transiency as a factor contributing to the disproportionality of minority students in special education. Studies suggest that some minority groups tend to be very transient in nature (Beavon, Wingert, & White, 2009; Norris & Clatworthy, 2003). According to Aman (2009) Aboriginal peoples have a disproportionately higher transiency rate than the average Canadian. High transience can result in lots of missed schools days. Children who are transient tend to miss a lot of school which makes those students lag behind in their academic work and eventually end up in special education (Audette, Algozzine, & Warden, 1993; Biernat & Jax, 2000).

In addition, a Canadian Policy Research Networks report by Richards and Scott (2009) revealed that student mobility is a highly significant determinant to "on schedule" high school completion. The report indicated that among students of Alberta entering Grade 10 who did not move or stayed in the same school, 75 percent successfully graduated in three years; while among those who moved, only 60 percent did. Again a similar pattern was observed in a study by the Alberta Ministry of Education, 2009. The study also found that a student moving between Grades 3 and 9 was a statistically significant factor in the probability of completing high school within three years. Additionally, another study, in British Columbia among a cohort of Aboriginal students entering Grade 8 in the 1998/99 school year, 57 percent of the students who did not change schools in elementary years (or only changed schools because their original school did not teach senior secondary grades) completed high school within six years. While among those who changed schools (for other reasons), the completion rate was approximately 30 percent (Aman, 2009).

Moreover, the British Columbia Aboriginal Education Branch and Special Programs Branch Report (2001) also found similar evident supporting that high transiency of some minority groups does contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students in special

education. The participants also mentioned transiency of minority students as a contributing factor to the high number of minority students in special education. Mary observed that

Oh yes! I've had students where they have missed so much school that they couldn't keep up to the assignments and when you test them they are just failing but some of them are so intelligent too, it's just that they haven't been there and haven't been able to accomplish their expected assignments or expected tests that they are designated that way as well. (Mary).

Usually when they move back they are behind two months or they come to the city they are behind two months and they have to learn new programs.... (Mary)

Tamara recounted that

I was lucky enough that when I was transitional with my family it was during the summer times. But I understand and have experiences of students that have extended family systems. Maybe one spouse lives on reserve and the other spouse works in the city. Their learning deficiency is sometimes assumed to be a developmental issue (Tamara).

Mary and Tamara both noted that high transiency hinders or negatively affect minority students' academic growth and increases the likelihood of being referred for special education. One of the main reasons given by the participants for the high transiency of minority groups is financial difficulty. The participants identified that parents often from lower socioeconomic background, are faced with financial difficulties, and are often forced to move which disrupts their children's education. Again, the practice of an extended family helping other families implies that when one family is having problems the children can relocate to live with other family members any time a family is in crises. Barb and Mary expressed the same idea that financial difficulty seems to be the main reason for the high transiency among minority groups:

We have such a transient rate and a lot of it has to do with housing and available places for them to live. As the rent goes up or the places get condemned, they move to someplace else, they change schools, we've had one student come to our school for a month, be gone for a month, come to our school for two weeks, be gone for the next month and a half, come back for two weeks and it's just.. How can you have the continuing education program goals when you're not there enough to be able to know where it is, to be progressing? So that's very difficult. (Barb).

The poverty groups are very transient and the truancy is usually high so those are factors that are not working to better themselves in the education world and it is consistently unimproved unless the school really connects with that family and gives family support then that child could probably better themselves. (Mary)

Aligning with the participants' perceptions, studies by Schafft (2006) and the Aboriginal Education Research Network Saskatchewan Learning (2008) affirmed that poverty often seems to be the underlying motive for such moves.

Other similar studies indicate that children whose families are highly transient have high behavior problems compared to less transient families. This could be partly due to a lack of sense of belonging for such students (Simpson & Fowler, 1994; Wood, Halfon, Scarla, Newacheck & Nessim, 1993). Some researchers believe that high transiency affects social relationships which are important for learning. Hence when children are constantly moving it causes a break in social relationships and interrupts academic experiences which can contribute to students' poor performance (DeWit, Offord & Braun, 1998; Wood et al., 1993).

### **Assessment**

Numerous researchers have raised doubts about the appropriateness of the present assessment methods used for assessing and identifying minority students for special education placement (Kea, Campbell-Whatley & Bratton 2003; Green, McIntosh, Cook-Morales & Robinson-Zanartu 2005; Russo & Talbert-Johnson, 1997; Patton 1998; Oslon 1991; Donovan & Cross, 2002). Likewise, there was a sense of dissatisfaction with the current assessment procedure used in referring minority students into special education among the participants. Several participants raised concerns about the inadequacy of current assessment practises in assessing referring minority students' strength into special education and academic outcome in the general school. Mary bemoaned that:

We really have to look at the tools we use. Like I previously stated, cultural references. If we had taken that same test and based it on the experiences of the community the child comes from, I'm sure that the child would score much higher, they would be able to relate to the questions rather than being asked questions that are set for an urban setting. Again, a lot of our First Nations students come from northern areas where their first language is not English, it's Dene or whatever their group is then the interpretation of the English question loses it's validity to the First Nation language so that confuses the child to respond to the question properly as well. We don't take that into factor because we consider all of our tests to be based singularly on English and then we wonder why our immigrant child doesn't succeed at these tests as well because we expect them to conform to our little box of our English world, I know in the special education world they are not allowed to change the question to make it fit the child, the child has to fit the question and that's a big factor that doesn't help the child at all.

Mary's words, resonates with Abedi's (2006) findings that most Psycho-Educational Assessments currently in use may not be culturally appropriate or in some cases relevant for

minority students and therefore may not give an accurate reflection of a student's ability. Li (1995) also suggests that identification and assessment procedures have traditionally been designed for a mono-lingual (English), mainstream population and thereby may negatively impact on minority students. A report prepared for the British Columbia Ministry of Education, Skills, and Training February (1998) also identified the influence of cultural difference on the assessment of immigrant students or second language English students. Another report by the British Columbia Aboriginal Education Branch and Special Programs Branch Report (2001) found there was generally an area of weakness in the assessment procedure in relation to Specific behavioral assessment procedure used in the referral process. This report revealed that in most cases there was little evidence of the use of a more sophisticated assessments or multiple-observation strategies. Teachers generally used simple behavior checklist as instrument for assessing this student's behavior.

Other researchers (such as Rueda, 1997; Bouvier, 2009; Sawa, 2010) expressed the view that norm-referenced standardized testing can be both culturally and socially biased against minority students. Rain notes this phenomenon stating that

Any time you're using standardized assessments, they're not made for the child, right? And, you've already told me that the child is having difficulty in a standard setting, so why would you use standardized assessment to?

The participants also expressed the perception that the assessment process seemed narrow meaning it does not assess the whole child. They thought the assessment process did not acknowledge other life skills and strength that minority students may possess. Tamara noted

that there are some family that finds other things more important. It might not necessarily be reading before bedtime but it could be going to cultural events every week. So they may be able to indicate all the cultural aspects of one particular culture that a first year University student would just be learning in Native Studies 105 or whatever. That's learning too. But how do you assess that in the school? Sometimes I think that the school system doesn't have the final adult product in their mind when they're thinking about teaching to the child. They are teaching for that standardized test that they all have to meet and now it's becoming even more standardized with that whole thing that the province is doing. There just seems less room to grow this way, to actually grow out. (Tamara)

Similarly, Mary noted that,

Maybe the child is getting better served at home through home-school or taking in the better experience of life where they become a very intelligent child but we don't have tests for that right? So that is part of it all.

Tamara and Mary shared the view that current assessment practices do not fully assess or take into account other life experiences and skills of minority students.

Sternberg (2007) also noted the failure of current assessment processes to capture the unique abilities and emotional intelligence among minority students because such practices are not culturally sensitive when the assessment processes are rooted and designed within Eurocentric framework and philosophy. As charity suggests,

When you have the majority of teachers being of European decent and white European descent then you will find that the way in which the others speak, act, behave comes across as being different from their own cultural norms. And when they are marked as different, they fear or feel that there is no pedagogy or knowledge that they have to bring this in. In other words, they would like everyone to assimilate to a particular mindset or a particular social emotional foundation but they have no methodologies for which to do that. So basically there is a tendency to mark them as the different from them, and they have no way of dealing with that difference, so it would be better to try to find someone with some newfound knowledge to make that transition for them to create an assimilated child who has gone into special ed. and assimilate at all of what the norm is and so doing they can then go back to those regular classes. But they are the other, they are marked as different so when their language is different they get marked as part of those called deficit. (Charity)

Furthermore, Li (1995) observed that "bias can occur at any level beyond the use of a biased test. Such bias occurs at the point of making decision about placement, or programming (pg 134).

Salend (2001) also raises the question about the definitions of certain disability category.

According to Salend vague definitions of socially constructed disability categories like emotional and behavior disorder (EBD) often result in culturally and linguistically based behaviors being misinterpreted often by white, middle class professionals as signs of the existence of a disability. Salend suggests these disability categories involve a high level of judgment and also because most of these disabilities are not medically tested. Such categorization is based on observations and symptoms that are not without personal background and cultural biases. Since interpretation of behavior is culturally constructed, it is not universally uniform (Encyclopaedia of Special Education). Similarly, the participants expressed similar opinion in regards to the cultural bias in the current assessment process. A clear example is seen in Kimba's comment



I think yes, in the sense of, if teachers do not understand where children are coming from, and what may make certain a child behave a certain way, in Canada the only solution they have, or the only ... for lack of a better word, diagnosis they have is that that child needs special education because they don't have any other background information to determine what's going on. Right? In that sense you have a number of children, immigrant children, minority children, who come from different backgrounds, express themselves in different ways that are quite different from the norm or the mainstream that may get moved to special ed. because of a lack of understanding.

Moreover, mis-identification of a student comes with a cost to society (tax payers) and other students. Students who really need special education have to share the resources such as time spent with special education teachers with students who might not need it, thereby reducing the amount of time the real special needs students might need. Again, other scarce resources such as funding are wasted when they could have been used for other purposes to improve education. According to Mary "in the time they spend on testing they could have been servicing two children in that time, it's a lot of time lost in paper work". Misidentification would not have been a problem if special education "magically" improved student's learning. Unfortunately this is not so and therefore proper assessment is necessary. Ray observed such situations commenting on the effect of misplacement of students,

Once you say that these are the right kids and these are the slow kids, that message filters down in such implicit ways that the slow kids get slower, accept their status as slow or dumb, or anything else while the same kid, basically, on the other side, gets better because of something about the self-esteem or the teachers like you. (Ray)

Consequently, the participants' observations suggest that it is crucial that the right assessment tools are used and steps are undertaken to ensure or to eliminate misidentification.

### **Historical Impact**

Another interesting finding that emerged in the data analysis was the role past government policies and inequalities play in indirectly contributing to the overrepresentation of minority students. Several of the participants made reference to the impact of colonization and residential school as contributing indirectly to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Furthermore, the participants made mention of the impact of larger societal influence rooted from history which negatively affects minority people and therefore minority children.

According to Charity

There appears to be a large number of students in Aboriginal communities with special needs partly because there are students who have lived in various communities with problem with drugs and alcohol and substance abuses. ...There are a lot of people whose children have needs for those kinds of services because of the kind of social, emotional and physical problems that they've had in their growing both in the womb and outside....., because many have not had a normative place to start; where they are in the midst of so many crises and traumas that have occurred because of the residential schools and colonization and racism and all those things. (Charity)

We have a generation of parents who have been through the residential school syndrome and are still suffering with their experiences and most of them being in a negative way in their life, and you know, school didn't really do anything for them in residential schools so why are they going to support us now? (Mary)

Charity and Mary's observation implies that the present situation of minority communities is not devoid of the past. History still permeates present day society. Past discriminatory laws and practice devalued minority peoples' knowledge, culture and being (Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Gibb, Rausch, Cuadrado & Chung, 2008). Consequently, certain minority groups still suffer from the effect of past injustice of slavery and colonization.

Similarly, (Banks, 2008; Cummins, 2001; Obgu & Simon 1991; Cajete ,2008) emphasized that minority students' success in mainstream public educational institutions is often influenced by a wide-array of historical, social, economic, and cultural realities. Additionally, Duran and Duran (1995) expressed that we cannot talk about the current situations of our aboriginal people and other involuntary minority without understanding and taking into consideration the impact of colonization and specifically the effect of residential school system on the current students. A look at the foster care system shows the effect of the breakdown of the family system and parenting skills due to past government policies which indirectly hinder academic achievement of some minority students.

Moreover, Skiba, Simmons, Ritter, Kohler, Henderson and Wu (2006) explained that racial and class inequities are maintained through institutional and individual actions and decisions such as the current assessment process which maintain the status quo and contribute to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. The present school system is still designed and reflects an Eurocentric pedagogy and structure creating a deficit mentality for people from other minority communities (Valenzuela, 1999; Valencia, 1997). Charity's words offer insight into this reality.

I think that Euro-centric privilege still animates throughout education systems as how normal is defined. And so special ed is really the abnormal being normed and if you are a normed group and everything you are is part of your norms, everything that is outside your norms then becomes a target for what might be called special, or different or unique. ...when you are in a school where difference leads to not speaking in the normed way or acting in the normed way, or believing and having attitudes that belong to the normed way then these are marked as other, different, and that marking of other is really a marking of other as deficient and inferior, and the self as superior.

Charity's words are reflected in Cherubini (2009) observations that society needs to "understand that what is perceived as normal is in fact an outcome of certain knowledge paradigms that have been historically established" (p. 13). Cherubini (2009) and St. Denis and Schick (2003) offer similar views with Charity that the present school system is Euro centric in nature, that in turn negatively impact minority students and create and sustain the deficit philosophies of minority culture and students.

Feagin (2006) also notes that these types of deficit practices are indicative of a racist frame, and promote and maintain White superiority. Lundberg and Startz (2000) also noted that inequality in the society is rooted in the historical legacy of colonization and discrimination, and the effects of this are persistent even though there are no laws that presently enforce such practice. Lundberg and Startz observed that "When there are community effects on human capital accumulation and communities are economically and racially stratified, income inequality can persist over time in the absence of policy intervention, and small initial differences can be magnified" (p. 270). Thus society cannot dismiss the impact of history in the present lives of minority groups who were enslaved or colonized. The effect of colonization is evident in the lives of minorities such as Aborigines, Africans and African Americans. African countries which had the majority of their natural resources and human labour stolen to develop countries like Britain and America as free labour and resource, has made these nations advanced, industrialized and super powers, given these countries the power to dictate market prices and policies for African countries which further worsen their predicament making them rely on benevolence and thereby creating a dependency on these countries for charities.

Moreover, past discriminatory policies and practices eroded the pride and equality of certain minority groups which has led to negative racial and stereotypical identities towards these minority groups. Most of the participants identified racism as contributing to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education while one participant disagreed that

there was any racism in the schools. Charity, Mary and Betty identify several complicating factors that lead to such stereotyping, where they note,

I would say that high-risk behaviours involved with alcohol and substance abuse, are created within the context of, societal influences that support systemic and personal racism creating negative racial identities that really create problems for Aboriginal people. They are then marked as deficient. And that marking of deficiency sets low expectations.... Those have been societal influences that have affected Aboriginal people's perceptions of themselves and the non-Aboriginal teachers' perceptions of Aboriginal people, children and youth (Charity)

We have to understand, especially where First Nations came from. I truly believe that the reserve era has played a big factor on present day attitudes and self identity, where aboriginal people were forced to live in confined areas called reserves and you have to remember they were a hunting gathering society where men were the warriors, they were the hunters and they were the livelihood of the village people and they would bring the hunt home so there was a lot of pride, lot of high self-esteem they had their role defined for them where women were keepers of the villages, they stayed in the village, they were gatherers, they would make gardens, that kind of thing and they were able to stay at home. Now you take this group of men who were warriors, you strip them of their roles and you confine them to the reserve saying you can't hunt anymore, you can't leave, so they have lost their role as being men, and if you look at the generation factor, women survived because we are used to staying home, we knew how to survive in a confined area, where men were travelers, they were warriors, they were hunters and they were always out in the community and all of the sudden, they are confined, so I think we are still suffering from that lack of male role in the traditional sense. It has really harmed us with the broken self-esteem, broken self-identity back then, what do they turn to? They turn to alcohol and we are still suffering from such high addiction in alcohol and I remember one elder saying we were healing ourselves with alcohol and beating the addiction and then came drugs. That's a devils food and it's really hard to heal from drugs and so that really plays a big downfall on our people too (Mary)

The participants' observations express the view that racism is still present in the society and poses additional negative consequences for minority groups and minority students in particular. Additionally the participants noted that issues of family breakdown, loss of language and culture and drug and alcohol abuse are a result of the far reaching effects of the residential school system and other past injustices perpetuated against minority groups. A study by Caughy, O'Campo and Muntaner (2004) found that experiences of racism among African American parents have important effects on the well-being of their young children. Furthermore, because schools are not separate entities nor is it devoid from the society hence negative societal views are brought into the school by educators and peers alike (Cherubini, 2009) which also poses additional

challenges for minority youth which increase their likelihood of being placed in special education. Rain also pointed out that

Racism plays a part in everything, right? I mean, I was born in Saskatchewan, I was raised in Saskatoon, I like Saskatoon. But, as a First Nations person it's a very racist place to be. So, yes, and it's, I mean, it has such a high impact on everything, I can't see how it wouldn't have an impact on the placement of children in Special Education, for a lot of the reasons that we've already discussed, especially with old fashioned teachers who think the child should fit the system and not the other way around.

In the same vein, Ray also observed that

They definitely like to designate minority students as a proxy, as camouflage, for their own racism. That even many privileged white-skinned people with autism will be left in the class and undiagnosed to placate the parents. But if you are of the lower classes and you have any kind of colour to your skin, or beauty, all the sudden you become the problem. But that's a latent racism that's in the school system when you look at who are their models. The rest of the students are very happy with just graduating, even if they acquire no skills and we have that turmoil going on in education now. Many white students graduate from high school with very little skills, but they still have the grades. Not great grades but grades that indicate that they should go to work somewhere or move on. But minority students would be weeded out long before that.

Similarly, Tamara also shared a personal experience with racism

I think the initial stage was may be feeling a sense of shame for where I came from, no, not ashamed of where I come from but ... I almost look at it from a third person point of view. I understand that mainstream society looks at minority family systems as almost inferior and so when I was going to the school as often as my schedule would allow me to, I felt like some of those people were thinking that. It seemed like such a barrier.

Ray provided further insight that

It's not always just the child that, if you have a child that's from a visible minority and there's racism in your community, well, you're going to have an angry child to start with. Well, then you put them in a compliant structure like a school, and it's not unlikely that it's going to boil over again. And, people can't just assume that the mainstream is fine and everybody else is the issue.

The participants all shared the sentiment that racism exist in the society and negatively impacted minority students' educational achievement. In support with the participants' observations, Battiste and McLean (2005) stated in a report prepared for the Canadian Council on Learning, that, "...systemic racism in all of its forms continues to be the biggest barrier facing First

Nations people” (p. 13). Hence it is important that issues of racism are dealt with to create equal opportunity for minority students and people as a whole.

### **Gender Differences**

Another dimension that seems to contribute to the over representation of minority students involves gender. Even though minority students often face similar challenges, there seem to be differences in the proportion of males in special education as compared to female students. Based on this assumption the participants were asked about their views on gender and special education and particularly on minority males in special education. Results from the research findings strongly suggest that there are more male students in special education than females (Reynolds & Fletcher-Janzen, 2007; Oswald, Best, Coutinho, & Nagle, 2003; Tschantz & Markowitz, 2003). Studies indicate that boys make up two thirds of the population receiving special education (Wehmeyer & Schwartz, 2001; Strand & Lindsay, 2009; Coutinho & Oswald, 2005; Lerner, 1993; Kvale & Reese, 1992). Skarbrevik (2002) also noted that boys are over represented in the emotional and behaviour category, autism, learning disability, and more likely to have Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD).

Responses from the participants were consistent with previous research when they commented

There does seem to be a lot more males. I don't know because I really haven't seen that many females either so it does seem to be this empty- sided ratio. I would definitely have to say my impression would be more males than females. (Tamara).

“ I believe that, something is telling me that it's higher in the males than it is in females and I can't really speculate why. It's just what I've noticed”. (Betty)

Well the data seems to indicate it, but, I really am not sure whether it's a gender issue or it's just that, that particular type of setting which is the way the schools are structured are more beneficial to girls than they are to boys, that the characteristics of them just may fit that structure better . (Rain)

However, one of the participants pointed out that the only area of gender influence that she has observed was in the area of autism.

The only area where I've seen gender significance is with autism, that it does affect so many more boys than girls. The other disabilities I've dealt with, with vision or hearing or Asperger's or Fetal alcohol syndrome and low cognition abilities all those other areas, even with Cystic Fibrosis or Spina Bifida. Those don't seem to have any effect on gender, just the autism really seems to be more boys than girls, I am not sure why. That seems to be the only gender area I have seen (Barb)

Participants offered possible reasons for this disparity. Several reasons were given for this question. The responses were grouped under these four categories: cognitive difference, physiological, lack of role model, classroom set up or curricula. Most of participants believed that males and females were cognitively different and that must have accounted for the difference. According to Ray

Well, the First thing that accounts for it is that males are cognitively different than females. They have different rates of development from birth..... boys hate to sit around in classrooms. It's not their ideal thing. They are actors and active and want to be involved in different ways than most females as they develop. Women develop far faster in everything. It's only later when men become stronger and run faster and do all the other, at the beginning they are not there. But their intuitive interests are counterproductive to the requirements of order in the classroom. (Ray)

Mary also added

I know psychologically, there has been a lot of studies that girls in the elementary level tend to be at a higher level in mental capacity than boys are too and I think that is a big factor because a lot of boys pull themselves back to performing grades in the middle years and high school levels and that's been proven over and over all the time ....

Despite the popularity of this notion among the participants, there is still debate concerning the issue of male and female cognitive function which is beyond the scope and intent of this research. Nevertheless, some researchers have gone further to prove that there are differences in size, rate, times for growth and sequence of the brain networks between males and females (Labarthe, 1997; Achiron, Lipitz, & Achiron 2001; Hanlon, Thatcher, & Cline, 2009).

Several of the participants mentioned that the difference in gender composition in special education could be due to difference in physiological or maturity levels between boys and girls. Lyon (1995) and Greenberg (2007) also suggested physiological maturity as a possible explanation in that the difference in maturity levels influence the behavior exhibited by males and female students in the classroom which might influence the risk of boys being referred for special education services (CEC). Mary observed that

... even dealing with pre-school students, boys are more rambunctious and maybe boys aren't ready yet at five and six and seven to be starting school and it's the maturity piece where girls are already playing with dolls and being socialized to realize that it's nice to be together in a unit and being able to be interested in reading. Typically, girls are reading far ahead of boys because boys just want to jump on the monkey bars and play cars and bump heads and tractors, they want to do more things physical. And maybe it's the boys are even more acclimatized where the dad's saying oh yah that's my boy – he

can do the summersault who cares if he learns to read now, he can do it later. Whereas the girls are more prim and proper and even within the Aboriginal community the boys are encouraged to be the hunter-gatherer and they are more likely to be out shooting their bow and arrow or shooting their little slingshot than they are to be looking at a book where as girls are more interested in that aspect of education. And boys can catch up to it but I think younger students, for sure there is more boys that don't want to be at school because the only thing they like there is gym (Barb)

The participants also discussed how maturity affects school readiness and reading ability explaining the immaturity of boys ages five and six years of age, affected their school readiness skills and reading abilities. Reading ability was frequently mentioned as an important factor influencing the high percentage of males in special education. A study by Badian (1999) revealed that boys are 3.2:1 more likely to have reading disability compared with girls. However, other researchers have postulated established different ratios which are either higher or lower than (Wheldall & Limbrick 2010; Liederman, Kantrowitz & Flannery, 2005; Rutter, Caspi, Fergusson, Horwood, Goodman, et al., 2004). Nevertheless, they all agree that boys are more likely to have reading difficulties than girls. Barb explained that

I think it's because they've missed that, from 6 – 10 years where the beginning of reading was supposed to be being taught they weren't yet ready to listen to it so it's not until they get to be in grade 4 and grade 5 and they can't read at grade level that there is all of a sudden, we need to help them more and it's because maybe they aren't mentally ready to be starting school at 5 or 6 (Barb).

The participants also identified school structure and curriculum as contributing to the preponderance of males in to special education (Gurian & Stevens 2005; Gurian, Henley & Trueman, 2001). In response to questions regarding the effects of curriculum on the disproportionate number of males in special education, Betty explained

Totally, as I was raised, I was taught that two or three types of learning styles was only acceptable. You sat in a desk, you learned from memorization, there was no allowance for group projects or getting together or getting some physical activity while you were learning. There were only two or three styles that were accepted. Where, I believe that genetically males tend not to do well in those types of environments. They need a little more action, they need a little more interaction, and it sounds like a stereotype but I think when you address more learning styles and more learning diversity you can definitely hit those targets and probably reduce the amount of male or gender differences in the classroom. (Betty)

A study by Wehmeyer and Schwartz (2001) investigated the effect of gender bias on the referral of students into special education programs concluded that biases based on behaviour



and gender stereotyping accounted for the under representation of girls in special education. A cogent example is seen in Rain's response:

it's just that, that particular type of setting, which is the way the schools are structured, are more beneficial to girls than they are to boys, that the characteristics of them just may fit that structure better (Rain).

Some of the participants noted that the lack of male role model and teaching staff in the school might contribute to the preponderance of boys in special education.

Again, there is lack of role modeling in the basic elementary level for teaching staff that are male role models and I think it's a big factor again that boys don't have that sense of belonging or sense of connection to a male and you know I think that really inhibits that learning process when you are being told what to do and how to learn from a female especially when you lack a male role model in the classroom and most of these boys usually come from a non-male representative in the family so they really lack that sense of connection, ... I feel a lot of the factors for boys in the elementary levels is just a lack of positive male role models. (Mary)

The absence of male teachers was suggested as a factor influencing the overrepresentation of male students into special education, in the sense that female teachers react differently to male and female students, which may result in higher rates of referral of boys in to special education (Anderson, 1997; Council of Exceptional Children, 2010). Sideridis, Antonion and Padelidu (2008) in a study investigating the influence of teacher biases with regard to identification of students with learning disabilities (LD), found that teacher gender is associated with biases with regard to identification of learning disabilities by a factor of 2:1. Tamara observed

I have seen a more panicked reaction to males to hurry up, hurry up and assess. With girls it may, because they are less, generally and stereotypically, less physical, less unpredictable that there would be more time taken to understand what's going on or an assumption that someone is taking advantage of the girl and they are looked upon more pitiful than if it were a male saying, "Okay", he needs to be dealt with quickly before they become unruly (Tamara).

Tamara's observation suggests that there is some level of gender bias on teachers' perception with regards to identifying students for special education services. Moreover, Tamara's observation affirms Sideridis, Antonion & Padelidu' study that there is teacher bias based on gender in the referral process for some special education programs.

Furthermore, some researchers indicate that minority males make up the highest percentage of all males in special education (Watkins & Kurtz, 2001; Serpell, Hayling,

Stevenson, Kern, 2009; Holzman, 2006; Noguera, 2005; Harry & Anderson, 1994; McBride & McKee, 2001). Given the premise that males have similar characteristics, then questions emerge concerning what accounts for the discrepancy or difference to why there is more minority males especially African American, Native American in special education than the general privileged male?

Most of the participants identified gender related factors as contributing to the over representation of minority males in special education. They cited the over representation of minority males in special education as a reflection of the disproportionately high numbers of minority students in special education. However, one specific reason mentioned as unique to minority students was the issue that there is some kind of misconception about minority males being more violent and therefore there is a certain amount of “fear” associated with minority males.

Well, my initial reaction is to think about how they react to my husband. There is this fear that if they don't control them soon that they'll become harm to others or lash out to staff. ... I can tell that they feel that if they don't say the right thing my husband might get mad or angry or retaliate or ... I don't know. You can just see it in their eyes that they feel somewhat frightened of him because he's a minority male. And with me I feel like they're reacting or acting like they need to take care of us, like we need the support (Tamara).

That difference from them is marked as a whole group of people who now they must either fear or that they have to be cautious of, don't hire them because they are the violent lot, don't trust them and so on. I think that the majority populations are those who are looking at those differences as objects of deficiencies and mistrust and fear. (Charity)

I don't know that they would be as fearful if he were a female? When he first started school the biggest problem was that he was physical, he was hands-on. I don't know how that would be perceived if he were a female because I would get these panicked phone calls from the principal saying he needs to go now! He needs to be removed from the school and they had suspended him. (Tamara)

Tamara and Charity's observations suggest that societal perceptions of minority males as being aggressive or violent creates negative conception in how teachers perceive minority males behavior, and also how they react and interact with them. Hence stereotypical misconceptions about minority males may contribute to teachers misconstruing minority males' actions and behavior as violent when no such intent is present (Hughes & Bonner, 2006; Monroe, 2006).

Hughes and Bonner stated that “transformation must begin with a racial attack on the myths that shape the thoughts and perceptions of individuals responsible for our educational systems; these individuals are ultimately responsible for enacting policies and procedures that are anabolic for Black males” and minority students in general (p.78). Tamara provided evidence of this bias against minority males as she recounted

Yah, my husband has told me stories about teachers being really hyper-sensitive to the things that he may or may not have done, just being really on top of what he’s doing and being really presumptuous (Tamara).

A Consequence of such thinking is that, minority males are more likely to be referred for Behavior Related Disorders. This is substantiated by the McBride & McKee, (2001) report to the British Columbia Ministry of Education that indicated aboriginal students in BC were 3.5 times more likely to be identified for Serious Behavior Disorder (SBD). Additionally, the study noted that the predominant reasons why Aboriginal students came to the attention of the school were because of issues regarding their behavior. The report reveals that most of the students were referred because of displaying externalizing behaviors such as - acting out, oppositional, aggressive or violent.

Equally important reasons often given for minority students’ suspensions were more subjective reasons compared to concert reasons for their White counterparts. For example teachers frequently cited “intimidating /disrespectful behaviour” for suspended minority males while on the other hand Caucasian’ students were disciplined for only well-defined serious infraction such as bringing a weapon to school or smoking on school premises” (Skiba, Micheal, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002). Consistent with previous studies, Verdugo (2002) noted that White students tend to be suspended for major serious violations such as bringing a weapon to school or using drugs while African American students tended to be suspended for vague infractions such as disrespect or appearing threatening. Skiba, Peterson, and Williams (1997) also observed that a high percentage of minority students are referred for noncompliance, disobedience, and a category called “other” which is a category with no standard definition and often left to the teachers’ personal discretion. This suggests that teachers from the dominant cultures might be misinterpreting minority students’ behaviour or actions as being aggressive when no such intent is present.

Moreover, several studies have also highlighted the discrepancy between the rate and level of disciplinary action given to minority students compared to their Caucasian counterpart (Wallace, Goodkind, Wallace & Bachman, 2008; Skiba, Michael, Nardo, & Peterson, 2002; Monroe, 2005; Townsend, 2000). These studies consistently documented that minority students receive two to three times more suspensions and higher referral than their White counterpart.

The disproportionate disciplinary action meted out to minority students indirectly contribute to overrepresentation of minority students in special education in the sense that suspensions often lead to missed school days, and missed opportunities to learn which in part contributed to missed lessons that need “catch up” and eventually the need for special education services which inadvertently contribute to the over representation of minority students into special education and widens the education gap between minority students and their white peers (Lewis, Butler, Bonner III, Joubert, 2010).

Furthermore, Lewis, Butler, Bonner III, Joubert (2010) observed that minority males receive harsher punishments than their White peers for similar acts of disobedience. Lewis, et al, in a study in a Midwestern urban school district found that about 45% of African American students were referred to a three-day out of school suspension penalty for acts of disobedience by the school district. Within this group approximately 30% of African American males were recommended for in school suspension. On the other hand, only about 18% of White students received recommendations for restricted recess, a less punitive sanction in comparison to the previous two sanctions levelled against African American students for acts of disobedience. Resonating with such research findings, Tamara recounted her son’s experience about disproportionate disciplinary action.

He was suspended when he was five from kindergarten. ...and it was because he was swinging on the monkey bars and he purposefully kicked a kid in the head and this was third party information and the supervisor that was in the playground had said that there was no, there was nothing that that child seemed to deserve of it or that they had irritated him or that there wasn’t anything that set him off that he just did it. So their reaction was to immediately run to the principal and the principal called me huffing and puffing like he had been running around and was speaking a million miles a minute saying this child needs to be removed as if he had a knife in his pocket. ... I was never given a written account of what happened. ...without me knowing what happened because that was the incident where I kept asking okay, where is the supervisor, was this actually seen or was the child just seen on the ground and that’s where I kept getting cut-off, I got cut off anytime I asked questions about the incident... Again, I can’t imagine a principal reacting

less than if a child had walked on the school ground with a knife. ....Because expulsion did come out of that principal's mouth.

In such instance, Lewis, et al, concluded that "behaviour, in this sense, is but a weak predictor of cross-racial variations in the imposition of disciplinary sanctions" (pg 9).

A critical analysis of the discrepancy in disciplinary action reveal that there is racial discrepancies in the dispensation of disciplinary measures that result in more severe consequences for some minority males (African American males) which is influenced in part by interpersonal and cultural misunderstandings, and attitudes of school personnel (Lewis, et al., 2010; Monroe, 2005, 2006; Bireda, 2002; Weinstein, Tomlinson-Clarke, & Curran, 2004).

Kimba provides further insight by commenting

When you think about minority kids or people from ethnic backgrounds, certainly in my case, gender and culture are interrelated in that girls in certain cultures, they are the ones that are laid back, they are the ones that are easy to get along with, they are the ones that are obedient because a culture, it takes for them to be a certain way. On the other hand, boys are not like that. Among immigrants, and I say immigrants because that's what I know, you have more immigrant boys being put in special ed. than girls because they are the ones that are more out there. The girls are more laid back, easy to get along with because at home that's how they are. It's the same with the boys, they're more, I guess maybe a bit more hyper, a bit more active than the girls. So if you look at those two things, it would make sense that more boys get put in special ed programs than girls.

If one takes Kimba's story as the norm, this suggests that the cultural difference seems to affect more minority males than minority female students. To this end, Tyack and Tobin (1994) stressed that in order to achieve equality in our school and improve the success of minority students, educational professionals need to debunk many of the commonly held myths about minority youth and families.

Furthermore, despite the high number of students referred for EBD, and high suspension rate for this particular group, these students do not seem to be receiving any intensive or necessary intervention which raises additional concerns about the placement (Lane, Wehby, Little & Cooley, 2005; Bradley, Doolittle & Bartolotta, 2008). Placing students into special education without additionally support might only further increase the resentment and often lead to more negative behaviour because teachers do not get to the root of the problems. Jull (2000) observed that many "Safe Schools" policies have been misunderstood as zero tolerance policies and often ignore minority students' social contexts of conflict, and the inherent imbalances in

social power relations that occur within schools. Points made by Rain and Tamara seem to substantiate this as they say

So, is it (the) child's behaviour or not? It's not always just the child that, if you have a child that's from a visible minority and there's racism in your community, well, you're going to have an angry child to start with. Well, then you put them in a compliant structure like a school, and it's not unlikely that it's going to boil over again. And, people can't just assume that the mainstream is fine and everybody else is the issue. (Rain)

I would get teased about where we were living and so I would react to my peers for teasing me and I would get in trouble because my reaction was more visible than their teasing but they would never want to touch what was bothering me. When I got into higher grades in elementary school and into junior high I used to get into a lot of fights. When I switched schools, whatever had been in my Cum. file had caused the principal to corner me in the hallway with nobody around threatening me to behave or else. It really puts a different spin on how I feel my son might be treated. (Tamara).

Rain and Tamara's experiences seem to suggest that it is important that educators strive to gain better understanding of minority students before the application of discipline action.

Consequently the participants made recommendations to help address the overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

### **Measures for remediation identified by participants**

The participants believed there was a need for change in the following areas in the current school system to help reduce the overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

- Assessment (Strength based Assessment instead of deficit based assessment)
- Teacher training- diversity and cultural training
- System overhaul- therapeutic education
- Community involvement

Similarly, Donovan and Cross, (2002) also observed that "addressing disproportion in special and gifted education will require addressing the entire educational system" (p. 28).

Consistent with this belief, Schissel and Wotherspoon (1998) also noted that there is the need for reconstruction of the present school system to enable minority students succeed. Seven out of the eight participants expressed the belief that the current school system is designed in a way that favours Anglo -Europeans and therefore creates a deficit conception of minority students.

According to Ray

(But) it's really too over-scientific, too over-technical of saying that they have learning disabilities without ever inspecting (if) the system itself is wrong structurally, that it's the situation people are caught in that is intolerant ...

But most of our education system is based on one singular model that hasn't worked in the past and probably won't work in the future. (Ray).

Ray's statement reflects a need for a transformation in the current school system. Again Ray's comment affirms Donovan and Cross's belief that in order to address the issue of overrepresentation of minority would require addressing the whole educational system including structure, philosophy and whole approach to learning or knowledge itself. There is the need for schools to acknowledge and incorporate minority culture in the school curriculum and other day to day activities. In other words, the participants suggested that schools have to be culturally responsive. There is the belief among the participants that schools need to embrace different cultures and reflect the diversity in the communities where they are located. Ray emphasised the importance of accepting all cultural knowledge as valid ways of knowing. He stated "So we have to broaden what we are trying to do to include people in communities of their culture".

Charity also echoed the need for culturally relevant teaching saying,

I would add development of materials that are more accurate in representation of the experience of minority students will all then contribute to helping to deal with special ed. children.

She continued by stressing there is a need

To develop some policies in the systems of learning to raise the awareness of Aboriginal students with diverse "Englishes" to learn how those different "Englishes" come about as well as the value in using their different dialects and "Englishes" in their schooling and to recognize these as no different from any dialect that might be coming from another country for example. I mean every country, every region has their own way of saying certain things and we just need to accept that those are natural and to add to them not erase them. (Charity)

All the participants were of the opinion that schools should be more open and welcoming to the diversity present in the society, by turning difference and diversity into sources of strength and knowledge for all students rather than division and apprehension.

Complementing the words of the participants, Haig-Brown (2008) similarly also advocates the need for schools to introduce different cultural knowledge into the curriculum and school

philosophy. Other studies also document the importance of including students' cultural background knowledge in the school to help improve minority students' performance (Nasir, Rosebery, Warren, & Lee 2006; Haig-Brown, 2008; Cole, 2010; Richards, Brown & Forde, 2007). Moreover, results from a study carried out by Lee (2006), demonstrated that when school instructions involved the use of both students' home culture and language there were increases in students' interest and participation. She also adds that cultural responsive education also balanced the power hierarchy in the classroom as both teachers and students learn from each other. Similarly, one of the recommendations made by the Aboriginal Education Provincial Advisory Committee Action Plan was the need to create a positive and welcoming school climate characterised by cultural affirmation and acceptance of Aboriginal world view as a valid ways of knowing and understanding the world. The participants also stressed the importance of schools accepting the different cultural knowledge as valid ways of knowing. Ray recommended

“We have to broaden what we are trying to do to include people in communities of their culture”.

Charity agreed there is a need for the

“Development of materials that are more accurate in representation of the experience of minority students will all then contribute to helping to deal with special ed. Children”.

Similarly, Cherubini (2009) also highlighted the importance of fully incorporating indigenous cultural knowledge into curriculum and the need for teachers to critically self examine their own epistemologies to better serve cultural minority students. In relation to Aboriginal students and integrate Aboriginal culture and content into schools, St. Denis and Schick (2003) posit that there is the need to include anti-racist education in teacher training and professional development programs. According to a Canadian Council of Learning (CCL) report by Battiste (2005) one of the foundational principles for Aboriginal learning and education is that learning is acknowledged as a lifelong process that requires both formal and informal opportunities for learning for all ages (p. 4). Thereby, there is the need for schools to recognize other forms of learning and assessment as valid and encourage other ways of or forms of learning. For example, children learn through other informal ways such as spending time with their parents, elders and grandparents. They learn how to survive on the land. All these forms of learning are worthy knowledge and skills that need to be recognized in the school. Schools need to include more multicultural education to empower all students and balance the power structure



in the schools. Cultural responsive education helps empower students and build pride in their own culture (Ladson Billing, 2000; Cummins, 2001; Jones, 2007; Inglebret, Jones, & Pavel, 2008).

The participants in this study identified the need for schools to encourage parental involvement and community participation in the education of its citizens, and this need for parental involvement has been found to be a positive contributor to students' success for both white and minority students (Jeynes, 2007; Hattie, 2009). Several studies have documented the effectiveness of parental involvement in facilitating children's academic achievement (Hattie, 2009; Desforjes & Abouchaar, 2003; Cox, 2005; Fan & Chen, 2001; Hara, 1998; Henderson & Mapp, 2002)

Consistent with previous research, all the three groups of participants shared the need for increased parental involvement in education. This belief was conveyed in the participants' perception when for example Kimba stressed that "It can't be just teachers or parents. It should be both groups that make an effort to ensure that all children succeed".

The parents in this study all stressed the need for teachers to have open and frequent communication with parents. They identified the need for schools to involve parents equally from the beginning in helping their children study instead of waiting till their children fall behind, and then refer them for special education. The participants frequently mentioned that schools should respect parents' choice and work together with them in finding alternative ways of assisting students before offering special education placement or suggesting medication as an answer.

Moreover, it is important for schools to establish respectful and trusting relationships with parents to encourage parental involvement (Pewewardy & Fitzpatrick, 2009; Nielsen & Gould, 2007; Watts & McCormick, 2008). The participants expressed their desire for schools to communicate with them without pushing blame on the parents. Tamara used her personal experience of the need for teachers to build trusting relationship with parents

Well, in my experience I've known that it really just helps to ask the parent what works at home instead of the more defensive, I don't know what you are doing at home but this is what we do at school: quote-unquote. That is what was told to me. When a child is reacting in school it's easy to say what's going on in a home but it could be less direct and less viewed as an attack to say when this happens what do you do? And then you might get the honest truth of I don't know what to do. (Tamara).

Such comments from participants suggest the need for teachers to respect and involve parents as equal partners in their children's education. In the same vein, Hoover-Dempsey, Walker, Sandler, Whetsel, Green, Wilkins & Closson (2005) and Dauber and Epstein (1993) observed that active invitation from school personnel played a significant role in influencing parents involvement in school program especially for minority parents. When teachers personally invite parents in a way it suggest to parents especially minority parents that their participation in their children's learning is welcome, valuable, and expected by the school. School invitation may also serve as a motivator for parents from lower socioeconomic background who might have problem with their role construction with regards to their children's learning or whose role construction might be passive (Laureau, 2003; Hoover-Dempsey, et al, 2005). Again, there is the need to provide training on how to involve parents and communities in teacher training programs as well as professional development (Hoover-Dempsey et al., 2005).

The necessity to acknowledge and incorporate minority communities in education and to have schools share ownership with the community and parents is vital and important in educating children (Pewewardy & Fitzpatrick, 2009; Howe, & Simmons, 2005; McBride & McKee, 2001). Examples of how this might occur may include involving community members such as elders and other prominent members in decision making, governance, and advocacy roles through forming school improvement teams or committees. This community engagement is likely to aid in creating a culturally responsive education. To help in this pursuit, schools boards' decision making should reflect the needs of the communities they serve. The schools can also be directly involved in addressing the needs of the community as a whole so as facilitate meaningful transformation and in helping create a congenial environment necessary for students' success. Such goals are identified by Ray who states,

We have to bring the community into the school. We have to bring the parents in and we have to ask the parents to help the teachers; help the administrators understand different learning styles; different forms of globality, different forms of humanity, instead of the single kind of British/French/Canadian models, which are all the same kind of stuff that the system is built upon.

Ray's remark suggests that it is vital that schools connect with communities and parents as equal partners in their children's education. Communities should be given a voice and involved in developing curriculum and policies for their children (Goddard & Foster, 2002; Simon & Epstein, 2001), because ultimately, the children belong, and are members of that community.

Given that students might live in that community for the rest of their lives, it is important that schools work together with the community to develop healthy communities and learners.

Another issue that six of the participants raised was the cultural representation of the teaching staff in the school. One of the participants specifically advocated for teachers coming from the community in which they serve; not people who just drive in to work and leave after eight hours. To some extent, this is helpful because when teachers live or come from that community they have better understanding of the students and the community processes. Again, sometimes it is difficult for school personnel who are often white middle class, who were successful in the current school system to recognize the iniquities of the education system or to challenge the status quo when it has worked well for them and their families all their lives. Consequently, the role of culture and the concerns of marginalized or minority groups are often not actively addressed in the structure or daily life of schools (Goddard, 2004). Such concerns were frequently expressed by the participants in a variety of statements where for example Ray and Charity noted

It's very important that children be taught by people who live in a community not ones who drive in and then leave. They have no understanding of what's going on in general. The poverty level, the scrambling level of people putting together jobs, putting together child care and putting together this and that, these schools represent a community and we have many of them that are supposed to be community schools in Saskatchewan; the teacher should be from that community. That should be a priority to make them reflective of the community, so you can't say well, here's the teachers and here's the parents. Once you get that divide, that the teachers don't know the parents, don't know the way of the parents are living, struggling, or why they came here or why they..... If you are that far attached, you're not going to get better. You'll just think they're like whatever community you came from but that a lot of value contingent that puts a distance between the parents and the teachers. (Ray)

I think that we need to bring to schools and higher administration more minority people, teachers and special education teachers so that they actually can know the difference between those who speak differently or behave differently or who have hyperactivity based upon various things, such as bad diet, too much sugar, too much this or that and to recognise the role that food plays in children's growth and development. (Charity)

Charity and Ray believed that diversity needs to be reflected in the teaching staff as well. Similarly, Richards and Scott (2009) shared the same view that there is the need for minority representation among the teaching staff in the school.

Richards and Scott also added that strategies should be implemented to validate the Aboriginal community within the school system by designing curriculum to reflect Aboriginal culture, in hiring of teachers, and in engaging local Aboriginal parents and community leaders.

Furthermore the participants with the exception of one suggested that teacher training needs to pay more attention to diversity training (Banks, 2006; Irvine & Armento, 2001; Sleeter, 2008; Whiting & Ford 2009; Bazron, Osher, & Fleischman, 2005). Teachers often have a great opportunity to build productive relationships with students (Smyth, Angus, McInerney, & Down, 2008). Thus, it is important for teachers to be culturally competent to be able to effectively teach minority students. What is more, Evans (2007) echoed that teachers' sense making about race influence how they react to students' needs and their willingness to respond to issues around race and attempt to change the status quo or intervene on behalf of racial minority students. Therefore it is important for teachers to understand their own position or privilege with regard to race in order to help other racially minority students. Most important, is that teachers should be taught to eschew the color blind mentality and be agents for social change (Ford & Grantham, 2003). Again, classroom environment offers teachers a unique opportunity and access to teach equity to all students; empower minority students and to bring about change necessary for healthy diverse community as classroom often offers a representation of students from different cultures. Having teachers who are culturally responsive will help teachers recognize and appreciate the strength that diverse cultural minority students have and build on it instead of only focusing on the deficits or seeing these strengths as deficit. The participants appear to share Kimba's perception that:

I think teachers need to get diversity training. Let's face it, Saskatchewan is bringing in a lot of newcomers and the schools are going to be full of minority kids and teachers need to understand these cultures. And you don't learn about other people's cultures by watching television or going to Folkfest, or going to a powwow. I think teachers really need to have a program. Changing the curriculum of teacher's colleges would be a bit of a stretch but I think there has to be a training that really gets teachers to understand the different cultures and the many backgrounds of the many kids that are coming into school these days. I think that's what's needed. (Kimba)

Charity also stated "So, educating faculty and teachers is one".

Mary also agreed that

In that way I think teachers really need to be exposed to a lot of multi-cultural in-servicing. I know there is a lot of First Nation materials, in-services and that, but still it's

not really a mandatory course and you still lose a handful of teachers who choose not to participate; chose not to recognize the need for educating themselves in the area of aboriginal education. I think a lot of teachers want to teach so the child can fit the curriculum box and it's a lot of work when a teacher has to start teaching in a multi-culture classroom and multi-learning levels because it is always easy to teach to a class than to teach to a group of individuals.

In line with the participants' recommendation, it is important that teacher training equips teachers to be sensitive and be able to support the different cultural, linguistic and children from different socioeconomic classes in the classroom (Solomon & Sekayi, 2007; Sleeter, 2008). According to Ladson Billings (2000) teachers who are culturally competent have the ability to engage and successfully teach students from different cultures while enabling the students to develop cultural competence and pride in their own culture, as Ray noted,

...They have to know how to empower students from where they are: from point A to point B. You're not going to do it through force, you can't push people. And if you do, they learn the wrong things. You have to accept who they are, accept that behaviour comes in diversities just like plants and animals and your job is not to create a thin line of sameness but to teach them how to use who they are to move toward competency, knowledge and skills verses simply behaviour. (Ray).

Banks and Banks (2006) suggest something similar when they urged that there is the need to have more than one course on diversity at the university because obviously even though teachers are given some sort of courses on diversity, it is not enough preparing the current teachers to meet the demand of the diverse student in the classroom. Furthermore, Ford, Grantham and Whiting (2008) concurred that there is also the need for teachers to be trained on how to teach and identify gifted students from diverse cultural background.

Equally important, seven out of the eight participants expressed the need for changes in the assessment process as a way to reduce the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. In the same vein, other researchers have also made the same observation (Li, 1995; Olson, 1991; Hamayan & Damico, 1991; Kretschmer, 1990). There is the need for assessment to go beyond psycho educational testing to include the entire learning environment and abilities to survive outside the classroom. Ultimately, at the end of the day education is to prepare people to be able to live healthy independent self-sustaining lives. Therefore, the participants's suggested that the assessment procedure should take into consideration minority children home life, skills and responsibilities outside of the classroom as well. Additionally, Ford and Whiting (2007) echoed that, changes in the assessment process should not be limited to special education

referrals only but to gifted programs where there is an under representation of certain groups of minority students as well. In the same vein, Mary expressed that

As for test basing, we really have to look at the tools we use. Like I previously stated - cultural references if we had taken that same test and based it on the experiences of the community the child came from, I'm sure that the child would score much higher. They would be able to relate to the questions rather than being asked questions that are set for an urban setting. Again, a lot of our First Nations students come from northern areas where their first language is not English, it's Dene or whatever their group is then the interpretation of the English question loses its validity to the First Nation language so that confuses the child to respond to the question properly as well. We don't take that into factor because we consider all of our tests to be based singularly on English and then we wonder why our immigrant child doesn't succeed at these tests as well because we expect them to conform to our little box of our English world, I know in the special education world they are not allowed to change the question to make it fit the child, the child has to fit the question and that's a big factor that doesn't help the child at all. (Mary).

The participants also suggested that schools need to change their focus from deficit assessment to strength based assessment (Ford & Whiting, 2007; Hernandez, 1994). Tamara, Ray, and Rain commented that

I think that if teachers were given the opportunity to work on strengths with kids even before they end up being assessed and labeled as Special Ed. students that a lot of the anxiety that comes with being an exceptional student would be downplayed or would be downsized....(Tamara).

And these disabilities have to be turned into abilities and they're not supposed to be displaced but they're supposed to be modified so they can provide the student with one deep cultural grouping of where he or she comes from or where the cultures of the world intersect. (Ray)

And, (you know), for all you know, the child can speak three languages. So, I mean, there's all sorts of background that needs to be looked at. And, so, I mean, the child speaks three languages and so we're having some issues with reading, in one particular language. I mean, yeah, there's an issue there but I mean, obviously if they can speak three languages, they have the potential so it's the instruction that needs to be modified. (Rain).

The participants' perceptions indicate that the need for strength based assessment seems necessary because learning is a holistic experience and so the assessment process must capture other life skills, experiences, attitudes and values.

The words of the participants suggest it is desirable as (Brink, 2002; Boone & Crais, 1999) noted to involve parents in the whole assessment process. Involving parents in the

assessment process is important as observed by Thompson, Meadan, Fansler, Alber & Balogh (2007) because this empowers the parents and increases the likelihood that they will support the children in their learning activities. Similarly, the two parents in the group also suggested that the schools involve parents and guardians in the whole assessment process and not only during IPPs. Kimba and Rain recommended that:

Well, I think that teachers should talk to parents first of all. Is the child doing something at school that he doesn't normally do at home? Talk to parents. Have a meeting with the parents and the child. Try a number of things. Try discussing... find out what's going on at home. It takes a lot of meetings. I've had that with my son's school. (Kimba)

Well, you know all parents, whether it's minority or not, I mean, it's very important that they understand the system and they understand how the system is supposed to or designed to work and they should also know what are the safeguards within the systems. So, if a teacher tells a parent, well we would like to have your student, your child assessed for some reason, the process needs to be laid out there, but it also, what are the possible outcomes of that? Not, we just want to test your child and then talk about placing them in another room some other time. That's all needs to be laid out in the front. And, so it's important that parents understand the system, and what are the expectations, and what are the issues. And, parents can be far more effective in supporting their child if they know the structure, if they know what the expectations are and have some say from the start (Rain).

Kimba and Rain pointed out that in addition to involving parents in the assessment process, there is the need to increase classroom support for teachers in the regular classroom, as well as, equip teacher with different teaching styles and skills to support the diverse students in the classroom (Gay 2000; Ladson Billing, 2006) before students are referred for assessment. Moreover, Sleeter (2008) in a study suggested that there is a relationship between teachers' beliefs about their students and their ability to be effective with the students (Irvine 1985).

### **Summary**

In this chapter, I presented and discussed participants' perceptions in relation to the research questions and existing literature discussing special education and minority representation. The first section describes the participants and context of their lives. The second section is a presentation of the research findings in relation to the research question and previous study.

The results findings were consistent with previous studies on over representation of minority students in special education. The participants unilaterally believed that there is an

overrepresentation of minority students in special education. The study also revealed that the over representation only seemed to occur in the preventable or non-biological category.

Additionally, the reasons given by participants for the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education were identified as multifaceted being shaped by the cultural experiences of students and professionals. The reasons identified by participants for the over representation of minority students in special education aligned with the literature i reviewed and included socioeconomic status, teacher characteristics, cultural differences, language, impact of history, gender and assessment. The study also found that participants viewed these factors as interrelated and interdependent in sustaining the inequalities in the community that works negatively to keep minority students from academic success.

One of the factors identified as most prominent in positioning minority students to be placed into special education was poverty. Participants voiced a consistent and strongly held belief that the socioeconomic status of minority parents was linked to the parents' ability to provide the basic needs necessary for minority children's cognitive and developmental abilities.

There was also the perception among seven of the participants that often schools do not know how to deal with the diversity and cultural differences present in the classroom which contribute to the disproportionate number of cultural and linguistic diverse students in special education. Again, seven out of the eight participants strongly agreed that teachers' cultural background knowledge does play a role in predisposing minority students into special education while one participant thought that teachers' cultural knowledge did not really affect the referral process.

Furthermore, the participants identified the impact of history or past discriminatory practises and injustice against minority communities as indirectly contributing to the preponderance of minority students in special education programs. They explained that racism rooted from past discriminatory policies and ideologies have affected minority students' perceptions of themselves and society's perception of minority students as being "less than" which negatively affects the students' self-esteem.

Equally important, the participants unilaterally agreed that teacher's perceptions, attitudes, expectations and behaviour can affect minority students being placed in special education. Seven of the participants felt strongly about this while one thought that teacher characteristics influence students' placements to an extent but not a huge factor. Similarly the



participants believed revealed that parental and community involvement is essential in minority students' academic success. They believed it is important for schools to collaborate with the parents and community in developing policies and educating students. Schools need to acknowledge the importance of cultural inclusion in all areas of schooling.

Moreover, there was a general sense of dissatisfaction among the participants in regards to the current assessment procedure in the school. However, one participant did not share this view. The rest of the participants strongly believed that assessment processes often negatively impacted minority's students' scores and thereby gave a false reflection of students' strengths and capabilities and in a way this contributed to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Consequently, the participants suggested that there is need for changes in the current school system to offer equal access to minority students and help reduce the overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

The participants' perceptions also confirmed previous studies that suggest that there are more males students in special education compared with females students, with minority males being overrepresented as well.

In conclusion, the participants' perceptions provided evidence that answered the research question that there is a perception of overrepresentation of minority students in special education in western Canada among parents, teachers and community members. Additionally, the participants identified the factors contributing to the overrepresentation as well as measures to help alleviate the situation.

## **CHAPTER 5: IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS OF RESEARCH FINDINGS**

This chapter present some of the implications and recommendations for practice, policy, research, and a concluding comment.

### **Implications of Research Findings**

According to the participants' perceptions there seems to be an overrepresentation of minority students in special education in this local context. Overrepresentation of minority students in special education raises serious concerns because education is often seen as an opportunity for upward mobility socially and economically, and viable tool against inequality for minority people (Allen & Hood, 2000). Again studies show that students in special education are more likely to experience long term negative outcomes such as high drop out, low opportunities of post-secondary education, unemployment and arrest (Oswald, Coutinho & Best, 2002; Osher, Woodruff & Sims, 2002; Quinn, Rutherford, Leone, Osher & Poirier, 2005; Blackorby & Wagner, 1996). Given the above argument, it is important for schools to investigate and to pay attention to the placement of minority students in special education seriously.

This study suggests that several factors contribute to minority students being overrepresented into special education in this local context and reveals that participants' believe all these factors are interrelated. Hence, the issue of over representation of minority students in special education cannot be dealt with fully without examining the other larger macro environment outside the school such as other societal processes that affect minority population in general. Dealing with one factor and not the others might not produce a helpful change because what we have in our classroom is a reflection of the society. For example, one cannot deal with minority students issue without understanding and acknowledging the role of history. Consequently a holistic approach is needed to deal with this issue (Salend, Garrick Duhaney & Montgomery, 2002).

Equal important, participants' believe that teacher characteristics play a role in students' academic achievement and in turn contribute to the underrepresentation or over representation of minority students into special education. The study also supports previous research that indicate that teacher characteristics play a big role in students' academic achievement (Darling Hammond, 2000; Peske & Haycock, 2006; Presley, White, & Gong, 2005). To this end, this

study suggests the importance of teachers showing their “humanness” when dealing with students in the classroom (Holiday 2005) because ultimately, every child needs love, acceptance, and respect to develop their potentials.

The study also found evidence suggesting that the current assessment process negatively impacted minority’s students by giving false reflection of their strengths and capabilities, and in a way contributed to the overrepresentation of minority students in special education (Li, 1995; Barrera, 1995). Additionally, this study supports other research that observed that standardized testing and current assessment methods used in referring minority students might not truly reflect the strength and potentials of minority students (Ford & Grantham, 2003; Li, 1995; McNeil, 2000). Again, there is the concern that as the province or schools moves more in favour of standardized testing, teachers will have no room or little time to develop foundations and relationships necessary for students’ success and nurturing the desire of life -long learning. Teachers will be more focused on completing the curriculum instead of encouraging and strengthening the diverse students’ learning goals or journey. Consequently there is the need to find alternative assessment test which is both culturally, linguistically and socio class appropriate to reflect the diversity in the society (Poon-McBrayer & Garcia, 2000).

Concerns were also raised by the participants about the need for parental and community involvement in the schools. They expressed that teachers need to communicate with parents and involve them in the assessment process. Seven out of the participants in the study indicated that schools need to give clear understanding of the assessment process, other alternatives and try different methods before suggesting such undertakings as medication. Thus the study proposes that education should be open. There should be equal involvement and partnership with community and parents.

The results of this study resonate with previous research and this holds true for the local area participants were involved in that socioeconomic status of students play a significant role in increasing the likelihood for minority students’ placement in special education (Zhiang & Katsiyannis, 2002; Donovan & Cross, 2002; Skiba et al, 2006). Levin (2001) observed, “family background continues to be the single most important predictor of educational and life outcomes” (p. 31). The study suggests that addressing issues relating to poverty is vital to minority students’ success.

Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that parental and community involvement

plays a big role in minority students' education. Parental involvement in the form of encouragement, motivation or providing necessary environment for children's mental and overall development, nurture and boost their learning spirit (experience).

The study also identified cultural difference as a significant issue contributing to minority students' placement in special education. Effect of Cultural difference cut across all spheres of education. Cultural difference can be evident or manifested in assessment process, curriculum content and teaching staff. Cultural differences also might contribute to racism and the perception of deficit for minority students or students whose culture or language differs from the dominant culture or school. It is therefore crucially that educators and school personnel and professionals recognize and acknowledge the role of cultural difference when dealing with minority students (Edwards, Holtz, & Green, 2007).

### **Recommendations for Policy and Practise**

Based on the findings of this study, the following recommendations were made with respect to minority students' education. This recommendation has broader implications in relations to Saskatchewan's school policy and contains practical recommendations for school divisions, school administrators, teachers, parents and community agencies to help minority students succeed in the school, and reduce the number of minority students placed in special education.

Given the paucity of research on how poverty positively correlates other risk factors, it is important that policies are enacted to deal with other broader socio and economic issues affecting minority communities such as employment equality, wages, childcare and housing. As such, government and schools need to undertake more aggressive measures and strategies to mitigate the adverse effects of poverty on minority students such as provide early childhood daycare and nutritional programs.

Moreover, it is imperative for teachers to be trained to deal with diverse students with disabilities in the classroom (Lombard, Miller & Hazelkorn, 1998). Teacher Education programs must ensure that pre-service candidates acquire the knowledge and skills necessary to teach students with disability in the regular classroom so as to make the classroom more inclusive and reduce the number of referrals into special education.

Additionally, Teacher Education programs needs to focus more attention in equipping teachers with classroom management skills, cultural competence and the ability to develop better

understandings of each individual student, their learning needs and to respond with effective instructional strategies.

Parental, community and school partnership is also vital in promoting minority students' success in schools. Community involvement can serve as back up, support or buffer for situations where parental involvement is low. Schools can invite elders or other community agencies who might be involved with the student in some ways to represent students in cases where parent are unable to participate in the pre referral, assessment, and planning process. Community volunteers can also assist by providing homework help and other after school activities for such students. Educators typically have only eight hours to engage in academic work and extracurricular and parents are often busy working and spend less time with students so there is the need for schools and the whole community to come together in educating and raising students.

The results of this study also signify the need for more cultural inclusion in the current school system. There is the need for acceptance of different cultural knowledge as valid, and respect for diversity in the curriculum. A Council of Ministers of Education, Canada (CMEC) (2010) report stated that "Language is the foundation of First Nations, Métis, and Inuit cultures. For learners to achieve success in education, affirmation of their language and cultural identity is essential" (p. 10). Thus it is important for teachers to be cultural responsive in order to deal with the diversity in the classroom. Teacher training programs must prepare teachers to be culturally competent so as to create positive, healthy, welcoming school environment that respects and reflects the cultural diversity in the society. Teacher training programs need to have more courses, perhaps community immersion programs for teachers to understand and appreciate the lives, values and virtues of minority students.

Furthermore, respect for diversity must also be reflected in the assessment process. The assessment process must reflect the cultural and linguistic diversity in the school. There is the need to move away from deficit model of identification to a strength based model of assessment.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The findings were consistent with prior research on overrepresentation of minority students into special education. However, the results of the study suggest further research in this area (overrepresentation of minority students) because of the small sample size the results cannot be generalized as such there is the need for more comprehensive studies using large sample size

and other methodologies to confirm if the same pattern is happening in Canadian schools. Again, a mixed method approach is recommended as a way to gain a full understanding.

Additionally, this study concentrated mainly on the perceptions of parents, teachers and community members with very limited reference to the perceptions of other stakeholders in the school communities. To get a broader perspective of the issue, future research could be expanded to include students and teacher candidates. As noted, most of the research on this topic has been carried out on populations in the United States, very little research has been carried out on this topic in Canada and as such further research using Canadian data is required or necessary to confirm that there is an over representation of minority students in special education in Canada.

A reflective commentary on some of my personal insights about this study follows.

### **Concluding Remarks: Personal Reflective Commentary**

With regards to the personal journey that I explored during the process of this thesis, I came to the realization that special education programs can be effective interventions when used properly. However, special education is not a “magic pill” for all students’ needs or problems, and can be detrimental to a student if misplaced.

Additionally, misidentification can be costly to both the individual student and the whole society. Funding that can be used better elsewhere maybe wasted. Hence, with the changing demography, there is the need for transformation in the way schools operate to accommodate the changing trend, and enable minority students’ equal access to succeed in schools.

Education needs to be open, inclusive and reflect the diversity in the community. There is a need for cultural and linguistically appropriate assessment process. Given culture plays a vital role in minority students’ education, schools need to reflect the different cultural knowledge in the classroom and in students’ learning. Therefore, it is important for teachers to be cultural competent because cultural competent teachers have a better understanding of their students and their needs which contributes to the development of programs tailored to those needs.

Nevertheless, the most important thing that minority communities want is for teachers and other professionals to be open minded. Minority communities are not asking teachers to be experts on their culture; they are asking for cultural sensitivity, respect, and a willingness to learn. Equally important, teachers and parents need to work together to support and share ownership for children’s learning. In the same way community involvement needs to be strengthened to encourage transformation in the communities as well. Again, community

involvement can also buffer cases where parental involvement is low or can assist both teachers and parents in the school and home in educating children.

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## **APPENDICES**

## **Appendix A: Ethics Approval**

### **Application for Approval of Research Protocol Submitted to University of Saskatchewan, Behavioural Research Ethics Board.**

Name of Supervisor: **Tim Claypool**, Assistant Professor  
Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education.

Name of Student: **Mercy A. A. Addo**  
Masters of Education, Educational Psychology and Special Education.

Start Date: 20th December, 2009                      End Date: April 30th, 2010.

Title of Study: **Minority Students and Special Education**

#### **Abstract:**

This study is part of an investigation into the overrepresentation of minority students in special education. Research in the United States and literature suggest that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in the U.S. since the introduction of special education programs into the school system. A study by Losen (2002) revealed that minority students were 2.3 times more likely to be identified as requiring special education services. Consequently, this study is an inquiry into the perception of teachers, parents, and community leaders about the overrepresentation of minority students in special education program. The study also explores the factors that influence the overrepresentation of minority students and how best to help minority students succeed in the present education system. This is necessary to better understand the current conditions and how to increase academic successes of minority students. The research questions underlining this study are:

1. If, how, and to what extent do teachers, community leaders, and parents perceive that there is an overrepresentation of minority students in special education?
2. What are teachers, parents, and community leaders' perceptions of the role that cultural difference influences minority students placement in special education?
3. What factors, if any, do teachers, parents, and community leaders believe contribute or influence the referral of minority students into special education?
4. What measures, if any, do teachers, parents, and community leaders believe can be used or put in place to prevent the over representation of minority students in special education?

#### **Funding.**

The study will be self-funded.

### **Conflict of interest**

There will be no conflict of interest since the researcher does not have any power or working relationship with the participants.

### **Participants:**

The study will involve six adult participants. The participants will be made up of parents, community leaders and professionals who deal with special education in Western Canada. The study will use participants above the age of 20 years since it would take more than 16 years of schooling to obtain a teaching certificate. The selection criteria will be different for the three groups.

The selection criteria for professional category will be

1. Must have over 5 years teaching experience or professional dealt with Special Education in the Canadian school system.
2. Must have taught in western Canada for the past 5 years or had their professional career in western Canada.

On the other hand, for the parent's category, the potential participant must be a parent or guardian of a student who is in special education or had received special education in the past.

Similarly, community leaders will be identified based on their contribution to minority community.

1. Must be of minority descent.
2. Must be a person who has influence in the minority community.
3. Someone who act as advocate for minority issues.
4. Heads of organizations that advocate for minority issues.
5. Must be a respected successful minority person in the larger community.

Potential participants will be contacted either by phone or directly to seek their participation. The first six people willing participants who fit the above criteria will be chosen. Participants will be asked to voluntarily participate in the study. They will be informed that the study is part of the requirement for completion of a master's degree. They will also be told that the researcher is interested in obtaining information on their perceptions of minority students in special education. They will be informed that the interviews will be recorded for the purposes of transcription. The participant(s) will be informed of the time commitment of approximately one hour and the possibility of a follow up interview of about fifteen to thirty minutes. The participant(s) will be interviewed in their own homes, school or any venue of their choice convenient to them if they choose to participate in the study.

### **7a. Recruitment Material:**

The recruitment material will include the following:

Invitation Letter to teachers, community leaders, parents (see Appendix D).

Invitation Letter to the Catholic School Board of selected school (see Appendix D).

Consent form (see Appendix E).

Data/Transcript Release Form (see Appendix F).

## **Consent:**

Each consent form outlines in detail the purpose, length of time, and potential risks and benefits of participating in the study. The form informs participants about the procedures involved in the study, the storage of data collected from the study, the confidentiality involved in the study, the volunteer nature of taking part in the study. The consent form also explains the researcher's readiness to be addressed questions at any point in the study at the contact information provided, and that the research has received approval on ethical grounds on [date] by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Sciences Research Ethics Board to whom questions may be addressed at (306) 966 2084, and that conducting interviews has been approved by the school board on [date]. The form also provides space for signatures of participants in the event they agree to participate. The researcher will meet with the participants individually to inform them about the research and explain consent in detail. Participants will be informed about the expectations for the study. In addition, it will be explained to participants that they are free to withdraw at any time without penalty and in the event they withdraw all data from interviews and observations with them will be destroyed.

Informed consent will be obtained from each participant. They will have a chance to read the consent form and be given opportunity for questions. The participants will sign the consent form to indicate their agreement to participate before the study proceeds. Provision will be made for those participants who may not be able to read the consent form. The researcher will read aloud and explain in lay language (non technical language) the criteria for participation. There will be no deception involved in this study. More importantly there will be no harm or risk involved in this study.

Letter of invitation and consent forms are attached.

## **Research methodology**

This study will use both semi-structured and in-depth conversational interviews (Mishler, 1989) as data gathering tools with the key informants.

Semi-structured interviews (interviews in which the same general questions or topics are raised to each of the key informants) give confidence of getting comparable data across participants using a list of general questions.

I will also use open-ended questions as a probe in order to gather a wide range of perspectives (in depth interviewing is designed to elicit a rich understanding of the participant's way of thinking. These interviews are less structured than a typical interview and involve the researcher probing into topics that the participant may bring up). Participants will be interviewed once or twice with the possibility of a follow up interview in the event of a clarification of information without clear meaning. Depending on how much information would be needed, the follow up interview will be carried out over an interval of two weeks. The interviews (30 – 45 minutes per interview) will be audio taped and transcribed. In keeping with respectful research, participants will have the opportunity to read the transcribed interviews for clarification and sign a Data Transcript Release (Appendix D). If quotes will be used, the participants will have the opportunity to read what is said, but identifying information will be excluded. Analyses will be made after the data is gathered. After the analyses, an interpretation will be made in relation to other theoretical frameworks, to explicate what the study means outside of the one context, and to make recommendations and transfer of knowledge to the community, local schools and policy makers.

### **Storage of data**

Upon the completion of the study, all data (field notes, transcripts, and tapes will be securely stored by the supervisor Tim Claypool for a minimum of five years in the Department of Educational Psychology, College of Education and destroyed in accordance with the University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

### **Dissemination of Results**

Participants will be informed that their contributions (which they agree to share in the Data/Transcript Release Form, Appendix D) will be presented at conferences and form part of the researcher academic and thesis work. At the end of the study, participants will be given the opportunity to have a copy of the manuscript upon request.

### **Risk, Benefits, and Deception**

There are no anticipated risks or deception in this research. Participants will be informed of the purpose, and reason for participating, and may withdraw at any time without penalty. There will also be no embarrassing or uncomfortable questions asked.

This study may offer an opportunity for participants to express their opinion and share their knowledge with other people. Participants may indirectly be making contributions to education of minority students in Canada and a contribution to education in general. There are no guaranteed benefits but it is hoped that this study might enhance how to meet the needs of minority students in the school system. Again, the study may also help in policy making and advocating for minority students in education and minority people in the long run. Additionally, this study may stimulate further studies about minority students' education in Canada. It is also hoped that the study may help contribute to ways to reduce overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

Relationships will be maintained on researcher-participant level, with participants having the right to withdraw from the study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort.

- a. Participants within this study would not involve any vulnerable persons such as people in emotional distress, people who are physically ill, and people who have recently experienced a traumatic event.
- b. Participants in this study are not considered members of a captive or dependent population.
- c. There is no institutional/power relationship between the participants and me.
- d. Within my data/files, I will take measures to protect the participants' anonymities.
- e. Third parties will not be exposed to loss of confidentiality/anonymity.
- f. Interviews will be audio-taped upon receiving participants' permission.
- g. Participants within this study will not actively be deceived or misled.
- h. The research procedures will be accommodating to the respondents' time and preference of location. As well, observation dates will be selected with participants' consent so as not to inconvenience them.
- i. I do not intend to ask questions that are personal, embarrassing or upsetting to participants.

- j. I will conduct the semi-structured interviews and the observations in a manner that respects the dignity and rights of the participants.
- k. Participants within this study will not embark on any perceived social risks.
- l. The research will not infringe on respondent's rights such as restricting access to education or treatment.
- m. Participants in this study will not receive compensation of any type.
- n. No foreseeable harm is associated with this study.

### **Confidentiality**

Confidentiality and anonymity will be observed throughout the study. Confidentiality will be preserved by the use of pseudonyms for real names in transcripts, analysis, and any document that results from this study. The school divisions of participants will not be identified. Any third party i.e students' name will not be used in the study. In the event that a particular student is used for illustration, pseudonyms will be used to conceal the identity of the student. Again, specific details which would enable a reader to deduce the respondents' identities within interviews will be made more generic.

### **Data transcript release**

The participants will have the opportunity to read the transcripts to clarify, add or delete information so it will accurately represent their responses.

### **Debriefing and feedback**

There will be lots of opportunity for participants to have feedback since the entire transcript will be available to them to review their response.

Again, since this study is collaborative, the participants will be involved throughout the study as they review their transcripts and their contribution to the draft of the study to feel reassured that the researcher is interpreting rightly and not misinterpreting their thoughts, feelings, and knowledge.

### **Required signature**

The Research Proposal has been reviewed by:

Supervisor, Tim Claypool	Date
Educational Psychology and Special Education	

Mercy Addo (Student)	Date

Dr. David Mykota	Date
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Department Head, Educational Psychology and Special Education



## Required Contact Information

Mercy Addo  
709, 107 Cumerland Ave  
Saskatoon, SK. S7N 2R6  
PH: (306) 374 2823/ 881 2986  
Email: meraddcy @yahoo.com/ maa724@usask.ca

Tim Claypool, Ph.D. R.D.Psych. Department of Ed. Psych. & Special Ed. University of Saskatchewan 28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X1 PH: (306) 966-6931 FAX: (306) 966-7719 Tim.claypool@usask.ca	Tim Molnar, Ph.D Curriculum Studies, Science Education College of Education, University of Saskatchewan 28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan s7n 0x1 (306) 966-7572 (office) tim.molnar@usask.ca	David Mykota Department Head, Educational Psychology and Special Education College of Education, University of Saskatchewan,28 Campus Dr., Saskatoon, SK. S7N 0X1 Phone: 306 966 5258. Email:david.mykota@usask.ca
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## **Appendix B: Letter to Interview Participants**

Mercy Addo  
Department of Ed. Psych. & Special Ed.  
University of Saskatchewan  
28 Campus Drive, Saskatoon, SK S7N 0X1  
PH: (306) 374 -2823/8812986  
Email: maa724@usask.ca/meraddcy@yahoo.com  
November 16th 2009

Dear Participant,

I am a graduate student in Educational Psychology and Special Education, specializing in special education at the University of Saskatchewan. I am undertaking a study of minority students in special education as part of a partial fulfillment for my program. I write this letter to ask if you will volunteer to participate in a study which has been approved by the Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education and the Behavioural Science Research Ethics Board of the University of Saskatchewan.

The purpose of the study is to explore the perceptions of teachers, community leaders and parents about minority students in special education. The study will involve semi-structured interviews, and open ended question interview. By courtesy of this letter, I am requesting your assistance as a participant of the semi-structured interviews of the study. There will be one sessions of 30 to 45 minutes or two sessions in the event that a follow up question is needed or for clarification of information. Your participation in the research is completely voluntary.

The purpose of the study is to explore ways to enhance the success of minority students in the current school system. Research suggests that minority students make more than half the proportion of students in special education programs. Research also speculates that Minority students are also 2.3 more likely to require special education services or program. Thus this study looks at minority students in special educations in general and the factors that make minority students more likely to require special education. This study aims to help identify and meet the needs and challenges facing minority student education. Additionally, it is expected that the research will help discover strategies and ways to meet the needs of minority students to enable them succeed in the regular current school.

I wish to confidently assure you that serious effort will be made to avoid identifying your school, school division, and yourself in the results of the study through the use of pseudonyms. The results will also be summarized. In case you have any concerns or would want additional information, you may contact Dr. Tim Claypool (email: tim.claypool@usask.ca) my supervisor at 966-7719 or myself at 374 283/8812986 call collect for out of town. Additionally, if your preference is by writing, you may contact me at 709 107 Cumberland Ave, Saskatoon, SK, S7N 2R6 or if by e-mail; my address is maa724@usask.ca or meraddcy@yahoo.com.

Thanks for considering this request.

Yours Sincerely,  
Mercy Addo.

### **Appendix C: Sample Question**

1. How would you describe yourself?
2. Please could you share with me a little about your background?
3. Could you tell me how you became involved in special education?
4. How many years have you been teaching?
5. What has your teaching role been like?
6. What educational background do you have?
7. Could you tell me about your experience as a teacher, community leader or parents and minority students in special education?
8. What do you think about the proportion of minority students in special education?
9. What is your perception of the culture and gender composition of students receiving special education?
10. What is your opinion regarding the influence of gender in students for special education services in schools?
11. Do you think teacher's perceptions, attitudes, expectations and behaviour affect minority students placed in special education?
12. Do you think cultural difference plays a role in influencing who is placed in special education?
13. Do you believe there are factors that contribute or influence the referral of minority students into special education?
14. What do you believe can be done or put in place to prevent the over representation of minority students in special education?
15. What aspects of your culture would you want to have at school?
16. Do you feel the culture at the school is different from the culture at home for minority students?
17. In your opinion will cultural responsive education have positive impact on students' learning, if so how?
18. What impact do you think cultural responsive education will have on student?

## **Appendix D: Letter of Consent for the Study on Minority Students in Special Education.**

### **CONSENT FORM**

You are invited to participate in a research project entitled (Minority Students and Special Education). Please read this form carefully, and feel free to ask questions you might have.

**Supervisor: Dr. Tim Claypool**, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, (306 966-6931).

**Researcher: Mercy A. A. Addo**, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education, (374 2823/ 881 2986), meraddcy@yahoo.com.

**Purpose and Procedure:** The purpose of the study is an inquiry into the perception of teachers, parents, and community leaders about the overrepresentation of minority students in special education program. The study also explores the factors that influence the overrepresentation of minority students and how best to help minority students succeed in the present education system. The study will employ semi-structured interviews. The researcher will observe/interview 1 or 2 times within a period of two weeks to discuss your perceptions of minority students in special education. You will be interviewed once or twice for 30- 45 minutes and each interview will be audio-recorded. The researcher will acknowledge that you can withdraw at any time during the study without penalty of loss of services. If you withdraw, the data collected from the interviews and tape recordings will be destroyed. The tape will be transcribed and analyzed to discover the patterns and themes discussed. You will be given a smoothed narrative version of the transcripts with false starts, repetitions, and paralinguistic utterances (um, eh, etc) removed to make it more readable. Later the researcher will check with you about your responses in the transcriptions. You can add, delete or change information to reflect what you wanted to say. You will be asked to sign a Letter of Consent for Release of Transcripts (See Appendix D SAMPLE LETTER OF CONSENT FOR RELEASE OF TRANSCRIPTS). You may also request to receive a copy of the study after the completion of the study. You will have the choice to choose a venue where you feel most comfortable. The results of the study will be used for a dissertation in partial completion for a Masters in Education. The confidentiality and anonymity of you will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. The results will be summarized in tables and direct quotations used where needed or appropriate. During the period of the study, I will keep contact with you for clarification and additional information.

**Potential Benefits:** This study offers an opportunity for you to express your opinion and share your knowledge with other people. You may indirectly be making a contribution to education of minority students in Canada and a contribution to education in general. There are no guaranteed benefits but it is hoped that this study might add to our knowledge about how to meet the needs of minority students in the school system. Again, the study may also help in policy making and advocating for minority students in education and minority people in the long run. Additionally, this study may stimulate further studies about minority students' education in Canada. It is also hoped that the study may help contribute to ways to reduce overrepresentation of minority students in special education.

**Potential Risks:** The research will be carried out in a spirit of mutual respect between you and myself. There are no foreseeable risks and there will be no deception. Direct quotations from the interview will be reported. Confidentiality and anonymity will be ensured by the use of pseudonyms in respect of you, your school, and school division. The greatest care will be taken to protect your anonymity.

**Storage of Data:** The data collected from you will be kept in a secure place and will be held at the University of Saskatchewan with instructor, Dr. Tim Claypool, for five years according to the University of Saskatchewan guidelines.

**Confidentiality:** The confidentiality and anonymity of you will be protected through the use of pseudonyms. No identifying information for example names or places will be used.

**Right to Withdraw:** Your participation is voluntary, and you can answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. There is no guarantee that you will personally benefit from your involvement. The information that is shared will be held in strict confidence and discussed only with the research team. You may withdraw from the research study for any reason, at any time, without penalty of any sort or without loss of services at the University of Saskatchewan. In the event of withdrawal, the data collected from the survey, interviews, tape recordings, and reports will be destroyed. If you withdraw from the research project at any time, any data that you have contributed will be destroyed at your request. If the research study extends over a significant length of time, the researcher will advise you of your right to redraw or continue. In the event that you choose to continue an additional consent form will be drawn to indicate that effect.

**Questions:** If you have any questions concerning the research project, please feel free to ask at any point; you are also free to contact the researchers at the numbers provided if you have other questions. This research project has been approved on ethical grounds by the University of Saskatchewan Behavioural Research Ethics Board on (2009). Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to that committee through the Ethics Office (966-2084) or you can contact me Mercy Addo, at 374 2823/ maa724@usask.ca or my supervisor, Dr. Tim Claypool, Department of Educational Psychology and Special Education ,(306) 966-6931) or can call collect if out of town.

**Follow-Up or Debriefing:**

You will have opportunity to review your transcript and may also request a summary of the findings at the completion of the study.

**Consent to Participate:**

(a) Written Consent

I have read and understood the description provided; I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my/our questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project, understanding that I may withdraw my consent at any time. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

or

(b) **Oral Consent**

I read and explained this Consent Form to the participant before receiving the participant's consent, and the participant had knowledge of its contents and appeared to understand it.

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(Name of Participant)

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(Date)

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(Signature of Participant)

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(Signature of Researcher)

**APPENDIX E: TRANSCRIPT/DATA RELEASE FORM FOR THE STUDY MINORITY STUDENTS IN SPECIAL EDUCATION.**

I, \_\_\_\_\_, have reviewed the complete transcript of my personal interview in this study (Minority Students in Special Education), and have been provided with the opportunity to add, alter, and delete information from the transcript as appropriate. I acknowledge that the transcript accurately reflects what I said in my personal interview with Mercy Addo. I hereby authorize the release of this transcript to Mercy Addo to be used in the manner described in the consent form. I have received a copy of this Data/Transcript Release Form for my own records.

\_\_\_\_\_  
Name of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Date

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Participant

\_\_\_\_\_  
Signature of Researcher